

GATEKEEPING AND SOCIAL WORK

**Gatekeeping and Social Work**

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### **Abstract**

Social work educators have an ethical responsibility to screen out students who are underperforming in a process known as gatekeeping. Gatekeeping is seen as a screening tool to prevent underperforming students from entering the field of social work. Field education represents an area where social work students are able to develop and demonstrate the necessary skills needed to work as professional social workers. When field placements are terminated, the results can be devastating for everyone involved. This qualitative study explored the experiences of nine field supervisors and one faculty consultant who had experienced an underperforming field placement student at some point in their careers. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with social workers who supervise placement students from northern and rural regions of Ontario both in person and over the telephone over a five-month period. The resulting data was then analyzed using the six-step approach developed by Tutty, Rothery, and Grinnell (1996). The results indicate that there are a variety of challenges identified by field placement supervisors when acting as gatekeepers of the social work profession. Discussions of the results, the implications for the field of social work, as well as recommendations, are presented.

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### **Introduction**

The field of social work relies heavily on undergraduate and graduate programs to produce competent professionals (Bogo, Regehr, Hughes, Power, & Globerman, 2002). Academic social work programs at the university level attempt to teach students the requisite skills and theories to be able to become competent and ethical social workers. Field education, on the other hand, provides students with the ability to be able to transfer what they have learned through their academic courses into direct practice. Field education within the scope of social work has become a very important mechanism towards increasing the standard of service supplied by social work students (Kanno & Koeske, 2010). Field education provides social work students with the ability to integrate what has been taught in the classroom with their practical experience. Field education is where students enter a social work setting, “typically for the first time in a professional role, to attain experience in applying social work theory and knowledge to practice” (Didham, Dromgole, Csiernik, Karley, & Hurley, 2011, p. 524). It is important to note that not every student who enters an academic social work program meets the requirements of the profession, and the ethical responsibility of gatekeeping the profession of social work has come to rest on the shoulders of schools of social work, faculty educators and field placement supervisors (Regehr, Stalker, Jacobs, & Pelech, 2001).

Social work field placements provide opportunities for students to translate the theories that they have learned from their coursework into clinical practice. Social work students are required to complete two field placements (one of 300 hours and one of 400 hours) in order to obtain their Bachelor of Social Work degree. As a result of providing placement opportunities for social work students, social work educators are required to screen out students who may be underperforming through a process known as gatekeeping (Koerin & Miller, 1995). Gatekeeping



is defined as the act of monitoring or supervising others (Brammer, 2008). While faculty members may witness student difficulties within the classroom setting, problems do not typically surface until the field practicum (Regehr et al., 2001). As a result of increased workload pressures and a general lack of resources in most social service agencies, issues surrounding recruiting and retention of qualified social work supervisors have also become a problem in social work (Tam, 2003).

Typically in social work field placements, the field supervisor provides supervision of the student and is employed by the placement agency (Luhanga, Larocque, MacEwan, Gwekwerere, & Danyluk, 2014). The faculty advisor acts as a liaison between the university and the field placement setting while the university faculty member provides support to field supervisors and students and assigns field placement grades (Luhanga et al., 2014). When field supervisors provide field placement opportunities to students from the participating university and the match is not successful, they can either decide that the field placement student is not suitable for their agency during the prescreening phase or they can make a recommendation that the student is not professionally suitable at the end of the field placement. Ultimately it is up to senior administration at the participating university to ask students to leave the Bachelor of Social Work program. This decision would be based on the participating university's *Code of Student Behaviour*, is specific to the participating university and cannot be universally generalized for all social work programs. Schools of social work can also recommend that a student is professionally underperforming, but this can often be a difficult and arduous task as there is a lack of policies regarding student behaviour on which to base this decision (Cole & Lewis, 1993; Gibbs, 1994; Tam, 2003).

The available literature that I reviewed points to the process of gatekeeping as a mechanism that can come with added responsibilities and ethical dilemmas (Brear, Dorrian, & Luscri, 1996; Koerin, & Miller, 1995; Regehr et al., 2001; Ryan, McCormack, & Cleak, 2006). Social work field supervisors must maintain the often competing roles of being both teacher and evaluator (Tam, 2003). Gatekeeping can also add to the workload of those willing to provide placement opportunities for social work students. In the field of social work, a gatekeeper is someone who evaluates the performance of students and determines whether they pass or fail. Many field supervisors are carrying both caseloads and supervising students at the same time when issues arise that are related to underperforming student behaviour. Tam (2003) argued that institutional support is important when field supervisors experience underperforming social work students. Tam (2003) also reported that one of the most problematic issues involving gatekeeping in field education is the friction that can develop between field supervisors, faculty members and university staff liaisons when implementing the process. Finch and Taylor (2013) argued that there is an adverse emotional impact on field supervisors when having to partake in negative assessment processes with social work students. Additional studies indicated that social work field supervisors have a real hesitancy when faced with the situation of having to terminate an underperforming social work student from their field placements (Raymond, 2000; Regehr et al., 2001; Regehr, Bogo, Regehr, & Power, 2007; Tam, 2003). Field supervisors who practice from a strengths-based perspective may feel conflicted in the dual role dilemma of being both social worker and supervisor (Saleeby, 2006). Saleeby (1996) pointed out that when using the strengths based approach, “all must be seen in the light of their capacities, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes, however dashed and distorted these may have become” (p. 297).

The existing literature on gatekeeping and social work is inconclusive when it comes to whether or not social work educators have an ethical responsibility to govern the field of social work by preventing underperforming students from entering the field (Redmond, & Bright, 2007; Regehr et al., 2001; Sowbel, 2011; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). When universities do not follow through with field supervisors' failing recommendations regarding a particular student, underperforming field placement students are then able to graduate and enter the field of social work. The topic of gatekeeping within the field of social work is a contentious issue as educators may not always agree when it comes to determining a specific student's suitability for the social work profession. Lastly, debate has also been generated around how the gatekeeping responsibility should be shared amongst field supervisors, faculty consultants and the university (Gibbs, 1994; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Tam, 2003).

The existing literature that can be found on the subject of gatekeeping maintains that professional unsuitability involves failing to adhere to social work values and principles, unresolved mental health and/or substance abuse issues, poor performance in the field placement, and a lack of respect for personal and cultural differences (Gibbs, 1994; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Moore & Urwin, 1991; Regehr et al., 2007). Adhering to social work values and principles is one of the basic tenements for becoming a professional social worker, yet when social work students fail to comply with these ethical standards, questions regarding their capacity to meet the requirements for the profession begin to arise. Gatekeeping is thus seen as the ultimate tool within social work education to prevent underperforming students from entering into the field of social work, and ensures that only competent students are able to graduate and become registered social workers. Failing to implement gatekeeping measures within social work education can result in harm to future clients (Regehr et al., 2001). Gatekeeping measures within field

education include interviewing and screening students prior to offering a placement opportunity, requesting references and/or a resume, monitoring day-to-day interactions with clients and within the agency, gauging the student's capacity to perform the required activities (case notes and responding appropriately to clients), and recommending a failing grade to the participating university, if necessary (Tam, 2003).

The process of gatekeeping in academic disciplines can be seen as a type of quality assurance that ensures that only qualified professionals enter a specific field of employment. Thus gatekeeping can be seen as an essential tool for a given profession, as it controls the rate at which students' progress to different levels of academic study, and can take place in disciplines other than social work, such as medicine (Cleland, Knight, Rees, Tracey, & Bond, 2008), education (Brown, 2008; Hawe, 2003; Turley, 1999) and nursing (Brammer, 2008; Duffy & Hardicre, 2007; Woodcock, 2009).

Gatekeeping is an essential function when it comes to maintaining professional standards. Some of the literature suggests that there needs to be more measures in place for failing students in academic programs (Barlow et al., 2006; Brear et al., 2008; Koerin & Miller, 1995). While other studies (Cobb & Lewis, 1989; Cole & Lewis, 1993; Grady & Mr. S, 2009) suggested that gatekeepers have an ethical responsibility to their profession to make sure that underperforming students do not enter the profession. It is important to note that underperformance refers directly to behaviours that undermine the *Canadian Association of Social Workers Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (2005), such as theft, fraud, deception, inappropriate professional boundaries, romantic and/or sexual relationships with clients, exploitation for personal or professional gain, sexual harassment, conflicts of interest, and breaching confidentiality (CASW, 2005). Tam, Coleman, and Boey (2012) identified professional suitability as factors related to ethics, social

consciousness, and practice as well as personal and professional conduct. The literature also indicated that the behaviours that comprise professional competence are often debatable and can vary from university to university (Cole & Lewis, 1993; Tam, 2003).

Gatekeeping within social work field placements is one of the most challenging responsibilities for social work educators, as field placements are viewed as the primary backdrop in which ethical violations and mental health issues are most likely to take place (Koerin & Miller, 1995). Yet undertaking practice learning gives students both the ability and opportunity to develop their social work skills in an environment that is conducive to learning. There is also existing literature that does not support the gatekeeping function in university social work programs. Regehr et al. (2001) questioned why educators should spend so much time dealing with all the difficulties associated with screening out students when the amount of students who occasionally need to be turned away from the profession are quite small. Tam (2003) also argued that universities are still failing to identify and define field placement underperformance and this can place faculties and universities in legally precarious positions. Disrupting field placements may not only impact the students involved, they can also affect field supervisors, other staff within agency teams, faculty consultants and faculty members.

There currently exists a dearth in the available research involving the impact that placement disruption has on field supervisors. Three theoretical articles and one study showed that field supervisors who practice from a strength based perspective can encounter difficulties when having to manage the responsibility of failing students in their field placements (Bogo et al., 2007; Saleeby, 2006; Sowbel, 2011; Tam, 2003). Only a few studies exist that examined the impact that failing field placements can have on those most impacted by these decisions, the social work student (Barlow et al., 2006; Gelman, 2004; Grady & Mr. S, 2009; Kanno & Koeske,

2010; Maidment, 2003; Parker, 2010). More research needs to be completed on this important topic both from the perspective of the field placement supervisor and the underperforming student.

As mentioned previously, there is a lack of available literature on underperforming students in social work field placements; however, for the studies that do exist, many do not include the different perspectives of the key players that are most affected by placement disruptions. Field placements provide students with the opportunity to develop their social work skills in an environment that is conducive to learning. Therefore, when students encounter problems at their field placements, or when a placement collapses for other reasons, the results can be quite devastating for all involved (Parker, 2010). Parker (2010) argued that terminating field placements can have significant cost implications, as students may be deprived of their tuition fees, while field supervisors and their agencies may lose the time and resources they have put into training field placement students. The focus of this study was designed to explore how social work field supervisors experienced underperforming students in the field placement setting; it will consequently add to an overall understanding of the impact that placement disruption has on field placement supervisors. This research study is a branch of a larger study from the participating university that used a qualitative descriptive design to explore the issue of “failure to fail” in professional programs including nursing, education, and social work (Luhanga et al., 2014).

The act of gatekeeping raises issues surrounding social work students’ capacity to meet expectations and whether it is the field supervisors’ role is to counsel them out of the profession entirely (Cole & Lewis, 1993). This study titled *Gatekeeping and Social Work* concentrated on the challenges and issues that may arise as a result of having to terminate students due to their

placement performance. It is a qualitative, exploratory study where ten individual in-depth interviews with nine social work field placement supervisors and one faculty consultant from rural and northern regions of Ontario were conducted over a five-month period in 2012. The data from all ten transcribed interviews were analyzed using Tutty et al. (1996) six-point data analysis and the salient themes were then developed and recorded. Each research participant was asked about their individual experiences surrounding how they dealt with an underperforming field placement student in an interview that lasted between 1 to 1.5 hours. It is hoped that the themes and recommendations from this study will help to contribute to the development of different policies, procedures and guidelines for future field supervisors in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) programs at the participating university.

Within the body of this paper, I will be presenting a review of the literature that is currently available on the topic of gatekeeping and social work, the relevant definitions and key concepts surrounding this particular topic, the methodology of this study, the results from the data analysis, recommendations made by the participants, the limitations associated with this study, and finally the conclusion.

## Chapter One: Literature Review

To conduct an initial literature review on the topic of gatekeeping in social work, I went to the Laurentian University website and accessed a variety of social work library databases. I searched for journal articles using the electronic databases Social Services Abstracts, Academic Search Complete, WorldCat and PsycINFO, using keywords such as social work, field education, placement or practice-learning combined with gatekeep\*, fail\*, termin\* or disrupt\*. Many of the articles that I found focused primarily on gatekeeping in the social work field, whereas I was primarily looking for gatekeeping measures in the social work field placement setting. Though there may have been a lack of existing literature available on placement disruptions, the articles that I did find on the broader topic of gatekeeping in social work undergraduate and graduate programs provided a historical backdrop and a working definition of the gatekeeping mechanism within social work.

The following topics will be further explored within the body of my literature review: definitions; gatekeeping as a concept; the history of gatekeeping; gatekeeping and social work field education; lack of standardized policies governing student behaviour; the conflicting role of the social work gatekeeper; the legal ramifications associated with gatekeeping; gatekeeping and other academic disciplines; and the impact of gatekeeping and placement disruption on underperforming social work students.

### Definitions

As a method of examining field placement disruptions in relation to social work, the behaviours, attitudes and belief systems that comprise *underperforming students* will be further examined and defined. Social work students are “expected to internalize social work values and to practice in accordance with professional standards of practice” (Tam, 2003, p. 52). Miller and



Koerin (2001) argued that “competence and professional suitability encompass more than the student’s acquisition of a knowledge and skill base” (p. 2) and suggested that factors such as personal characteristics, values, and experiences can also determine professional social work suitability. In 2005, the *Canadian Association of Social Workers* adopted a new *Code of Ethics* that set forth a list of six values and principles that social workers must uphold in professional practice. These six values included “respect for inherent dignity and worth of persons, pursuit of social justice, service to humanity, integrity of professional practice, confidentiality in professional practice and competence in professional practice” (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005, p. 4). Therefore, it is important that social work students uphold the principles and values of the social work profession according to the *Code of Ethics* both in their academic and nonacademic development. Failure to adhere to and demonstrate these standards of conduct could possibly lead to being considered unsuitable to work within the social work profession (Tam, 2003).

For my research project, I will be defining *underperforming students* as those who display values and beliefs that are incompatible with the social work profession, have demonstrated behaviours that could potentially harm future clients, or have yet to develop the requisite skills that are necessary to enter the field of social work. Underperforming field placement students “constitute a very small proportion of the total student body, the challenges they present can consume great amounts of time and energy” (Regehr et al., 2001, p. 128). Studies and theoretical articles have shown that field supervisors rarely disrupt field placements and have continuously let underperforming students pass even when their behaviour has been questionable (Cole & Lewis, 1993; Gibbs, 1994; Redmond & Bright, 2007). When students subscribe to a set of values that are incompatible with the social work profession or display

unacceptable behaviours in the field placement setting and are still allowed to enter the profession, the wellbeing of future clients can become severely compromised. As Moore and Urwin (1990) argued, producing qualified social work graduates must always remain a priority for social work educators. The consensus from the available literature indicated that professional unsuitability includes academic performance problems, incompatible ethics, and could include unresolved mental health issues or emotional instability (Koerin & Miller, 1995; Moore & Urwin, 1990)

### **Gatekeeping as a Concept**

Over the past several years, numerous articles have been written on the need to enforce gatekeeping policies within undergraduate and graduate social work programs in order to screen out underperforming students from entering the profession (Brear et al., 2008; Cole & Lewis, 1993; Grady & Mr. S., 2009; Miller & Koerin, 2001; Moore & Urwin, 1991; Regehr et al., 2001; Reynolds, 2004; Ryan, Habibis, & Craft, 1997; Sowbel, 2011; Tam, 2003). Moore and Urwin (1991) argued that the implementation of the gatekeeping process requires two key areas of support: (1) social work educators and (2) university administrators. The authors suggested that social work faculty need to be committed to the gatekeeping process that can be time consuming and intense, while university administrators may need to consult with an attorney regarding their student evaluation processes (Moore & Urwin, 1991). Tam (2003) reported that better gatekeeping measures needed to be implemented during the pre-practicum phase and suggested that “suitability indicators may include personal interview by the university field education coordinator, a reflection paper, and letters of reference” (p. 59). Cole and Lewis (1993) argued that social work educators have an ethical responsibility to graduate students who are equipped to perform as social workers. Yet the literature shows that even when university social work

programs have standardized measures governing academic and nonacademic student behaviour, they are rarely enforced (Koerin and Miller, 1995). Koerin and Miller (1995) found that factors such as external pressures and professional role conflicts contributed greatly to the lack of enforceability of the gatekeeping function in many undergraduate social work programs.

Field placements have become an integral part of university social work curriculum, as they assist students with developing the appropriate skills to be able to work in the profession of helping others. Several articles developed a working definition of gatekeeping and how it can be used to screen out underperforming students in social work field education (Miller & Koerin, 2001; Moore & Urwin, 1991; Ryan et al., 1997; Tam, 2003). Tam (2003) defined gatekeeping as “a mechanism to evaluate students’ performance and suitability for social work practice in order to assure the quality of professional practice and to protect the integrity of the profession” (p. 51). Gatekeeping is an ongoing process that begins when a student applies to an undergraduate social work program and can continuously be enforced by field supervisors, faculty liaison and university administration through coursework and field placements (Tam, 2003). Curren and Atherton (2008) indicated that there is a need for clear and consistent procedures that not only safeguard the rights of students, but also allow social work educators the ability to fulfill their roles as professional gatekeepers. Regehr et al. (2007) argued that current evaluation procedures in university social work programs do not provide sufficient means to allow field instructors to adequately communicate their feelings surrounding student ability and performance. Though there may be a dearth in available literature that speaks directly to the mechanisms of gatekeeping in field placements, the hesitancy of failing social work students because of a fear of possible litigation is something that can also occur in the academic institution and field placement setting. In an article written by Grady and Mr. S (2009), the authors included the

perspectives of both a faculty member and a student who had received a failing grade, which resulted in an automatic expulsion from the MSW program in which he was enrolled. This particular student spoke with the graduate school committee who offered him advice on how to go about appealing the decision surrounding his expulsion (Grady & Mr. S, 2009). The student ended up losing his appeal as the university agreed with the school of social work's decision. Grady and Mr. S (2009) reported that academic behaviours such as not completing required readings, coming to class late on a continuous basis and receiving failing grades were all valid reasons that could lead to academic expulsion. This article recommended that social workers must raise awareness around the gatekeeping conflict that continuously takes place within the profession. Grady and Mr. S (2009) also indicated that social work faculty and administration need to have continuous dialogue on how they will implement the gatekeeping role in their own academic program, while the university admissions process must be more stringent to ensure that potential students are appropriate for both the university and the profession. Lastly, university administration and field supervisors need to figure out how they can balance their role as both educators and evaluators (Grady and Mr. S, 2009).

### **The History of Gatekeeping**

According to Moore and Urwin (1991), gatekeeping is not an entirely new concept for social work educators, as the history of gatekeeping can be traced all the way back to the year 1898, when recognition surrounding the profession of social work began to rise. As the field of social work became increasingly recognized as a legitimate profession, social work entrance standards became established as well. Since the late 1950's, social work literature has consistently emphasized a variety of ethical obligations that social work educators need to undertake in order to instill gatekeeping measures within the profession (Cobb, & Lewis, 1989;

Cole, & Lewis, 1993; Grady, & Mr. S., 2009; Moore & Urwin, 1991). Koerin and Miller (1995) argued that despite minimal gatekeeping efforts during admissions, since 1978 most applicants have been accepted into university social work programs.

Moore and Urwin (1991) pointed out that the Allenberry Colloquium in 1971, helped to clearly define the responsibilities of social work educators, which included only allowing those who have the propensity to become competent social workers into the profession. Moore and Urwin (1991) indicated that due to increasing enrollment in social work programs in the 1980's, graduates experienced greater professional demands due to lack of funding and higher emotional stress. Out of gatekeeping's historical context, Moore and Urwin (1991) recommended that social work educators must continue to evaluate whether or not students have the potential for social work practice.

Historically, the literature also focuses on the notion of suitability as part of what contributes to underperformance (Currer and Atherton, 2008; Tam et al., 2012). Currer and Atherton (2008) indicated that decision making in relation to the professional suitability of social workers is a complex and highly contested area of interest and is best understood as an "ethical judgment made by a community of practitioners" (p. 279). Currer and Atherton (2008) argued that as the definition of professional suitability in social work becomes clearer, it is important to consider who is involved in making these judgments. Tam et al. (2012) suggested that professional suitability is "poorly defined and lacks systemic and measurable constructs" (p. 228). Tam et al. (2012) conducted a study where they identified the underlying factors of suitability being related to ethics, social consciousness, and practice as well as personal and professional conduct. The authors felt that these key components of professional suitability, and how it contributes to underperformance, provided the groundwork for the creation of an

instrument that could assess the performance of social work students. When examining the history of gatekeeping in the field of social work, there appears to be a lack of clear expectations governing student performance throughout the years, and this has come to heavily impact the ability of field supervisors to confidently make decisions surrounding student performance.

### **The Process of Gatekeeping**

Potential applicants are often chosen for admission to social work programs based on the quality of their written applicant essay, high school grade point averages, interviews and work and volunteer experience. As part of the requirements associated with obtaining a social work degree, most schools of social work require students to complete two field placements. Social work students may either have the option of choosing their own placement or having one assigned to them through the field placement coordinator. Social work students prepare for their field placements by completing required coursework and maintaining the requisite grade point average in order to stay in the program. Typically during the duration of a social work field placement, the field placement student is paired with a social work supervisor from the participating organization and a faculty member from the university. The field educator is required to provide the daily instruction and supervision of the social work student whereas the faculty consultant is the link between the field placement setting and the educational institution (Luhanga et al., 2014). If social work students are either underperforming in their field placement or in the classroom setting, faculty administration are responsible for implementing the most appropriate solution. One of the primary responsibilities of field supervisors is provide feedback and assess students' competence for practice (Bogo et al., 2007) whereas university faculty members assign the final placement grade (Luhanga et al., 2014).

At the beginning of any social work field placement, one of the standard requirements for field supervisors and social work students is to develop the student/agency contract. This contract outlines both the student and supervisor's capacity to develop and meet specific goals and objectives. It is mandatory that students attend their field placements in a regular and consistent manner. Lastly, regular meetings between placement students, field supervisors and faculty consultants are another requirement of the social work field placement.

### **Gatekeeping and other Academic Disciplines**

The process of gatekeeping takes place not only in the field of social work, but in a variety of professions. There have been a small number of academic articles published on the topic of gatekeeping in medicine (Cleland et al., 2008), education (Brown, 2008; Hawe, 2003; Turley, 1999) and nursing (Brammer, 2008; Duffy & Hardicre, 2007; Woodcock, 2009). The literature that I reviewed on gatekeeping and other disciplines referenced the need for more training for field supervisors so that they are better equipped to deal with field placement underperformance (Brammer, 2008; Duffy & Hardicre, 2007; Luhanga et al., 2014).

In a study conducted by Brammer (2008), 24 nursing students from a metropolitan university in Brisbane, Australia were interviewed in order to better understand the role and responsibilities of the gatekeeper in the nursing discipline. Brammer's (2008) findings pointed to the need for recognition of the complex role of the nursing mentor, as well as how to successfully evaluate student nurses using the profession's learning objectives. In another article on gatekeeping within the nursing profession, Woodcock (2009) argued that supporting students in their placements is part of registered nurses' professional responsibilities and must be undertaken through mandatory student mentorship. Woodcock (2009) pointed out that even though it is vital for nursing mentors to support students who are at risk of failing their

practicums, it is also “their duty and responsibility to fail them if they do not meet their learning objectives” (p.18). Wilkes (2006) highlighted how nursing mentors can often have different yet competing roles when they take on the dual responsibility of being both a professional and a teacher. As a teacher, they may be more lenient when students make mistakes during their practicums citing it as possible learning opportunities (Wilkes, 2006). Alternately, if they are viewing their student’s performance solely through a professional lens and not allowing room for mistakes to be made it could heavily impact nursing mentors’ ability to support students successfully (Wilkes, 2006). Duffy and Hardicre (2007) concluded that even though nursing mentors have an ethical responsibility that “requires them to identify underperforming students and manage the situation appropriately”, nursing mentors find this one of the most difficult requirements of their role as a mentor (p. 28).

Though most of the available literature on gatekeeping and other professional disciplines can be found within the nursing field, Cleland et al. (2008) investigated whether or not failing to fail medical students was an actual issue for medical educators in the United Kingdom. The results of this particular study indicated that many different factors come into play when medical practitioners fail to report underperformance in medical students. These factors included “attitudes towards individual students, attitudes towards failing a student, normative beliefs, efficacy beliefs, skills and knowledge, and environmental constraints” (Cleland et al., 2008, p. 801).

The topic of gatekeeping surfaced within the field of education as well (Brown, 2008; Hawe, 2003; Turley, 1999). Brown (2008) identified the importance of professional experience as a key component in bachelor of education programs and highlighted how the development of shared expectations and goals by both the supervising teacher and the student could lead to



successful outcomes. Brown (2008) developed an assessment rubric for professional teacher education programs and sent it out to supervising teachers. The feedback that Brown (2008) received indicated that the assessment rubric clarified expectations of student performance, assisted students who were at risk of failing and provided a starting point for supportive feedback. In another article on gatekeeping and education, Hawe (2003) interviewed student teachers, lecturers, and other faculty involved in primary education programs at a New Zealand college in an effort to investigate the assessment experience. The results of Hawe's (2003) four-year study indicated that faculty members presented a hesitancy to act as gatekeepers to student teachers and were also reluctant to award failing grades. Lastly, Turley (1999) designed a study that looked at the factors that alerted university supervisors to move beyond their typical approach with the underperforming student teacher in order to improve the chances for a successful experience. Turley (1999) surveyed 17 university supervisors in an elementary pre-service program at an American west coast university and found that results pointed to weak performance in a variety of teaching skills rather than on interpersonal factors as indicators for at-risk student teachers. Respondents from Turley's (1999) study indicated that they would offer more assistance to underperforming student teachers than to those performing at a satisfactory level.

### **Gatekeeping and Social Work Field Education**

Social work field education plays a pivotal role in professional development as it provides students with the opportunity to develop skills, integrate their knowledge, and actively learn (Raymond, 2003). Similarly, Wayne, et al. (2006) described field placements as being an integral part of social work education. Field education has been recognized "as having a major impact on graduates' preparation for professional practice" (Wayne et al., 2006, p. 161).

University social work programs, field supervisors and faculty consultants are regularly given the task of having to decide whether or not a student is compatible with the social work profession. Regehr et al. (2001) argued that while it may be more preferable to screen individuals who encompass attitudes and behaviors that are incongruent with the social work profession at the time of admission, it is often during the field placement where problems begin to surface.

During field education, it is the field supervisor who is faced with the difficulty of having to identify and confront unsuitable students. The field supervisor “is often left with the role of identifying the problems, supporting students in the process of growth and change, and, perhaps ultimately recommending that a student does not pass their practicum” (Regehr et al., 2001, p. 140). Wilson (1981) classified two types of problems that field supervisors identified as commonly occurring in field placements: the first one involved a student performing an action that is so damaging to others that immediate removal is necessary to protect the agency; while the second type involved a pattern of behavior of lesser problems that the student is simply unable to overcome. Pease (1988) argued that the evaluation of students in their field placements is often a difficult and challenging task for field instructors. Other challenges that field supervisors experienced as a result of disrupted field placements included lack of standardized criteria for professional conduct (Tam, 2003), inadequate screening procedures prior to field placements (Bogo et al., 2002), lack of support from the university social work department (Koerin & Miller, 1995), the dual role dilemma of those implementing the gatekeeping function (Curren & Atherton, 2008), and fear of legal ramifications (Cole & Lewis, 1993).

Faculty consultants and instructors also play a pivotal role in assisting field supervisors in understanding the expectations of the social work program and help to reinforce policies and procedures surrounding student conduct. Though field supervisors and faculty consultants are

saddled with the gatekeeping responsibility, the major difference between the two is that field supervisors assist students in their professional training at the field site, whereas faculty consultants provide guidance and support to the student and the field instructor. For the purpose of this study, I will be specifically interviewing field supervisors as field education plays an important role in determining whether or not a student is ready to enter the social work profession. It is often field supervisors who are the first to witness problematic behavior that could raise questions surrounding professional suitability.

### **Lack of Standardized Policies Governing Student Behaviour in Field Placements**

A total of three studies developed lists of clearly defined policies and procedures surrounding how students should conduct themselves at their field placements (Duffy & Hardicre, 2007; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Tam, 2003). Two articles on gatekeeping identified a lack of standardized policies that govern student behaviour in field placements within undergraduate and graduate social work programs (Koerin & Miller, 1995; Tam, 2003). Koerin and Miller (1995) surveyed 81 MSW programs in the United States to find out what types of situations or behaviours led to the development of policies surrounding nonacademic-based student terminations. Koerin and Miller's (1995) findings indicated that at the time of their study, a majority of the MSW programs that were surveyed had no guidelines when it came to failing students for nonacademic reasons. In a theoretical article that synthesized the importance of gatekeeping, Tam (2003) argued that "the lack of standardized criteria for professional suitability allows students to be able to enter the social work profession even though they are unable to demonstrate adequate knowledge, skills, and behaviors for professional practice" (p. 54).

Another issue that surfaced in the existing literature is a lack of information regarding who exactly governs or defines the measures of adequate performance in nursing. Duffy and

Hardicre (2007) compiled a list of common indicators that alert nursing mentors to the possibility of failure. Some of these indicators included "...absence of professional boundaries and/or poor professional behaviour; experiencing continual poor health, feeling depressed, uncommitted, withdrawn, sad, tired, or listless; unreliability, persistent lateness/absence; preoccupation with personal issues and lack of theoretical knowledge" (Duffy & Hardicre, 2007, p. 28). Overall, there is a lack of a general consensus regarding what constitutes an underperforming student in the existing gatekeeping literature; field supervisors and faculty may be hesitant when faced with terminating underperforming students as clear guidelines surrounding student behaviour rarely exist.

### **The Conflicting Role of the Social Work Gatekeeper**

A major challenge that field supervisors are faced with, are the psychological feelings that may develop when having to terminate underperforming social work students in field placements. When providing field education, social workers may occupy two different roles that can often be quite incompatible with one another. Many social work field instructors practice from a strengths-based perspective that is based on the belief that people have the potential to change (Saleebey, 2006). When field instructors are faced with an underperforming student, many are reluctant to fail them, even though the student is unable to meet the requirements that are needed to enter the profession (Tam, 2003). Field instructors are expected to identify, confront and address problematic behaviours and attitudes that occur in field placements, yet there can be a real reluctance to gatekeep when field placement supervisors practice from a strengths-based perspective (Sowbel, 2011). This dual role dilemma can be particularly problematic for field instructors when they identify more with the helping role of social work rather than their role as educators. They may be unwilling to carry out the requisite gatekeeping duties, which may

include terminating students from their field placements (Tam, 2003). Bogo et al. (2007) conducted a qualitative study that explored the experiences of field instructors when evaluating and providing feedback to their students. Bogo et al. (2007) found that field instructors expressed feelings of regret and concern “that they had in some way failed to make progress with these students” (p. 110). These difficulties can be in direct conflict with their personal and professional values, which can help create an uncomfortable paradox for the field instructor.

Grady and Mr. S. (2009) featured the perspectives of a faculty member from a graduate school of social work and a student who had failed the faculty member’s class. This article utilized two different vantage points surrounding the impact of gatekeeping and is one of the very few case studies that illustrated the conflicting role of the social work gatekeeper. This article showed the bevy of emotions that were felt by the faculty member when faced with the task of having to fail a student. Grady and Mr. S. (2009) concluded that even though it may have been difficult at the time expelling a student and being a student who was expelled, both parties maintained that gatekeeping is an important measure that helps to protect the wellbeing of future clients.

### **The Legal Ramifications Associated with Gatekeeping**

In the last thirty years, much focus has been placed on the legal ramifications that may arise when students are terminated from their university social work programs without due process (Cole & Lewis, 1993). Most of the literature that is currently available on the topic of gatekeeping in social work has focused on the reasons why students have been asked to leave their field of study, the legal ramifications associated with student terminations, and how the decision-making process is reached when a student is in danger of failing out of their academic program.

Several articles centered on the legal ramifications surrounding the termination of social work students (Barlow et al., 2006; Cole & Lewis, 1993; Redmond & Bright, 2007). Findings from a variety of studies on the topic of gatekeeping indicated that fear of possible legal repercussions can be one of the major deterrents to why social work faculty members, faculty consultants and field placement supervisors are hesitant when faced with having to fail underperforming students (Cole & Lewis, 1993; Dudek, Marks, & Regehr, 2005; Redmond and Bright, 2007; Sowbel, 2011; Tam, 2003). In a legal study by Cole and Lewis (1993), the authors analyzed several relevant court cases that were related to academic and disciplinary dismissals of students. Cole and Lewis' (1993) findings indicated that in recent years, the court has given universities much greater reign in dealing with issues surrounding student dismissals and that the analyzed court cases supported the belief that professional behaviour in field placement settings is an additional requirement of any given professional program. They argued that termination guidelines must be clearly defined by universities so that undergraduate social work programs do not run into any legal issues when having to terminate students for nonacademic reasons.

Dudek et al. (2005) developed a qualitative study in which 21 clinical social work supervisors were interviewed. Dudek et al. (2005) identified four explanations as to why clinical supervisors were reluctant to fail students and these included a lack of proper documentation, lack of knowledge surrounding what to document; anticipation of an appeal, and lack of remediation options. The findings indicated that field placement supervisors were "failing to fail" underperforming social work students because of possible legal repercussions due to lack of proper documentation and unclear policies surrounding expectations and student behaviour. In another study, Sowbel (2011) explored the topic of gatekeeping using a quantitative rating tool designed to test MSW students' field performance. Sowbel (2011) surveyed 154 MSW students

and found that over half of them had been rated as exceptional in their field placements, which supports what she believes is a long-standing notion that social work field education performance ratings are highly inflated. The findings from this study indicated that high field performance ratings can be attributed to a variety of factors such as fear of litigation, pressure to increase program enrollment, conflicting supervisory roles, lack of clear suitability requirements, and difficulties in measuring field performance. Redmond and Bright's (2007) analytical study synthesized the *Young v. Bella* (2006) case where a student sued a professor from Memorial University for defamation and damage due to being accused of self-plagiarism and later put on the Child Abuse Registry as a suspected abuser as result of what the student had written in an academic paper. Redmond and Bright (2007) argued that social work educators have very little access to training regarding their legal obligations as professional gatekeepers and that this is something that needs to be changed. Redmond and Bright (2007) pointed out that social work educators who become involved in admissions screening "need to ensure that their faculties have clear and fair admissions policies and that each admission decision – but particularly each decision denying admission - is well supported and documented in a way that demonstrates fairness" (p. 171). The authors indicated that the *Young v. Bella* (2006) case highlighted the need for additional training opportunities for social work supervisors surrounding the legal duty of care owed to students and how it applies to situations involving admission, grading and field education. Tam's (2003) theoretical article reviewed some of the major challenges associated with gatekeeping, including the fear of litigation. Tam (2003) found that field instructors had difficulty when terminating students' as many programs did not have appropriate screening policies that listed the types of behaviours that can lead to possible placement failure. Since many university social work programs lacked concrete guidelines surrounding student behaviour,

the threat of litigation by a student who has failed their field placement may always be a possibility. Though social work placement students need to be held accountable to the same ethical standards as social work professionals, there appears to be a growing trend in passing underperforming field placement students for fear of potential legal repercussions.

### **The Impact of Gatekeeping and Placement Disruption on Underperforming Social Work Students**

Much of the literature that is available on gatekeeping and social work failed to include the voices of those most affected by gatekeeping measures, which is that of social work field placement students (Bogo & Power, 1992; Brear et al., 2008; Burgess, Phillips & Skinner, 1996; Cole & Lewis, 1993; Henderson, 2010; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Moore & Urwin, 1991; Pease, 1988; Ryan et al., 2006). Overall, the existing literature on gatekeeping and social work appeared to place the onus or blame on social work students when field placements or practicums go awry (Bogo et al., 2007; Cobb & Lewis, 1989; Currer & Atherton, 2008; Redmond & Bright, 2007). However, a small number studies do exist that examined the adequacy of field placement settings as well as the importance of having knowledgeable and experienced field placement supervisors to mentor social work students (Barlow et al., 2006; Gelman, 2004; Grady & Mr. S, 2009; Kanno & Koeske, 2010; Maidment, 2003; Parker, 2010).

Historically, Kadushin's (1968) theoretical article may have been written over 40 years ago yet he provided a differing perspective as he highlighted how supervision can become a threat to a student's need for independence and autonomy, and that the field supervisor can control evaluations, grades and future opportunities for employment. If the relationship between supervisor and student is compromised in any way, students may feel like they are being unnecessarily targeted or attacked. Since the relationship between field supervisor and student is



paramount to a student's success in the field placement setting, this relationship can be further eroded when the supervisor takes on the additional role of doing therapeutic supervision with their placement student (Kadushin, 1968). Field placements have the potential to become stressful for social work students as they could partake in situations involving child abuse, domestic assault and addiction issues that could become traumatic or potential triggers for placement students. When the placement student becomes the client, issues can undoubtedly arise between a student and a supervisor as boundaries may blur. This particular issue has become an increasing concern in many social work field placement settings. Supervisors who see underperforming students as clients, and who mentor from a strengths-based perspective, may do both themselves and the student a disservice by confusing these roles. Few studies exist within the available literature that focused on the type of supervision that field supervisors use when mentoring placement students, as well as the potential for multi-faceted types of relationships to exist between field placement supervisors and social work students (Miller & Koerin, 2001; Parker, 2010).

In another early study, Kolevzon (1979) randomly sampled graduate social work students in order to measure the level of criticism directed toward the supervisory relationship. Kolevzon's (1979) study provided an important contribution to the topic of gatekeeping as the author suggested that the relationship between the field supervisor and the social work student allows for the "transmission, assimilation and application of the values, knowledge, and skills of professional social work practice" (p. 241). Yet just as there are social work students who are not equipped for the social work profession, there are also field supervisors who do not possess the necessary experience or qualifications to provide valuable learning opportunities for field placement students. Having never supervised a placement student before, new field supervisors

may run into potential difficulties when it comes to providing clinical supervision, setting professional boundaries and conducting evaluations. Kolevzon (1979) stated that due to the intensity of the relationship between students and supervisors, this particular relationship could become vulnerable to “stresses or blockages in the learning process” (p. 241). One way to circumvent some of these issues is for the university to provide ongoing support to social work field supervisors in the form of training opportunities, field manuals, regular site visits and telephone contact. Kolevzon’s (1979) article may have been published over three decades ago, yet he contributed significant research surrounding the nature of the supervisor and student relationship that is still relevant today.

In a more recent study conducted by Maidment (2003), 39 social work students from a Bachelor of Social Work program in Victoria, Australia, were surveyed surrounding their experiences of their field placements. The results of this study indicated that a variety of students encountered significant problems in their social work field placements that were of no fault of their own. The issues that these 39 BSW students faced in this particular study transpired at the placement setting and included the following: being verbally abused by clients, having to travel long distances to their field placement locations, encountering internal conflict at the placement agency, and experiencing considerable work related stress during their field placements (Maidment, 2003). Maidment’s (2003) study also noted that the financial impact associated with field placements were a major concern for these respondents as both the distance and cost to travel to get to their field placements created added stress to their placement experience. This study indicated that there is a widespread need for additional opportunities for social work students both before and during their field placements, such as how to effectively deal with safety concerns and workplace conflict in the field placement setting. Consequently, Gelman

(2004) also argued the same point in that one of the main factors as to why social work students were having negative experiences at their field placements was due to students' level of preparation when they enter the field. If social work students are entering their field placements without the requisite skills to effectively deal with interpersonal conflict, stress and client abuse, then they could become at risk of either underperforming in their field placements, burning out or choosing to exit the social work field entirely.

Kanno and Koeske (2010) surveyed 144 MSW students at an American university on their satisfaction levels surrounding their field placements. Results from this study indicated that the level of supervision that was provided by the field placement supervisor was directly related to student satisfaction in their field placements. When students feel valued and respected in their field placements by their placement supervisors and other agency staff, their level of satisfaction greatly increased (Kanno & Koeske, 2010). The findings from this study highlighted just how mutually impactful the relationship between field supervisor involvement and student satisfaction can be. Further research is needed on the relationship between student suitability, satisfaction and performance. Kanno and Koeske (2010) argued that the relationship between supervisor and student is of the utmost importance to field performance satisfaction; however, when problems begin to arise, the relationship can fracture very quickly.

Lastly, Harr and Moore (2011) explored the psychological impact of compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction on social work students in their field placements. Harr and Moore's (2011) study revealed that social work students were more at risk for developing compassion fatigue in their placements when there was "...an overload of responsibilities, a sense of being denied decision-making input, little financial reward and positive recognition, lack of status or respect in the workplace, lack of job fulfillment, or reduced sense of accomplishment and

achievement” (p. 352). Consequently, Harr and Moore (2011) recommended that field supervisors need to be trained in addressing and recognizing the symptoms of compassion fatigue amongst their placement students. In summary, universities need to be more diligent in the type of training they provide in the classroom setting before they allow social work students to enter the field placement setting so that students end up flourishing in their field placements.

### **Summary**

In the aforementioned literature review on the topic of gatekeeping, I found only a handful of studies that examined the impact of placement disruption and underperforming students in social work field education. As a result of this dearth in available and existing literature, more research needs to be completed on this important topic. Similar research surrounding gatekeeping has been conducted in other disciplines such as nursing, education, and medicine with very similar results. Out of this very small collection of articles on gatekeeping and social work, few studies actually used qualitative methodologies to examine the impact that underperforming social work students can have on field supervisors, faculty members, faculty consultants, and the placement students themselves. Most studies used quantitative measures to examine satisfaction and retention levels of social work field placement supervisors and field placement students. There were a small number of articles that examined how social work students experienced unsatisfactory field placements; however, two of these articles had been written nearly three decades ago and may not be conducive to the current sentiment. Findings from additional studies on this topic indicated field supervisors play a vital role in providing mentorship to field placement students, but that the provision of adequate supervision is something that needs to be highly regulated and safeguarded by social work programs as well

(Barlow et al., 2006; Gelman, 2004; Grady & Mr. S, 2009; Kanno & Koeske, 2010; Maidment, 2003; Parker, 2010).

Several articles developed a working definition of gatekeeping in field education as being a mechanism to screen out underperforming social work students with the role primarily performed by placement supervisors, faculty consultants and other university staff (Miller & Koerin, 2001; Moore & Urwin, 1991; Ryan et al., 2006; Tam, 2003). Historically, gatekeeping in social work can be traced back over 100 years ago, when recognition of the profession began to arise (Moore & Urwin, 1991). The process of gatekeeping also takes place in a variety of other disciplines such as medicine (Cleland et al., 2008), education (Brown, 2008; Hawe, 2003; Turley, 1999) and nursing (Brammer, 2008; Duffy & Hardicre, 2007; Woodcock, 2009). Lastly, studies indicated that field supervisors, faculty consultants and schools of social work are hesitant when having to fail underperforming field placement students due to a lack of standardized policies governing student behaviour (Koerin & Miller, 1995; Tam, 2003), the conflicting role of the social work gatekeeper (Currer & Atherton, 2008; Tam, 2003) and the legal ramifications associated with gatekeeping (Cole & Lewis, 1993; Dudek et al., 2005; Redmond & Bright, 2007; Sowbel, 2011; Tam, 2003). In the next section, I will discuss the primary research question that this study has attempted to explore through the analyzed data of nine field supervisors and one faculty consultant from the northern and rural regions of Ontario.

## **Chapter Two: Methodology**

This next chapter on methodology will discuss why a qualitative design was utilized for this research project, the connection between qualitative research and social work as well as my own researcher interest. This chapter will also address the primary research question as well as the seven sub-set questions that were asked during the open-ended interview sessions with the research participants. Lastly, this chapter will then cover the research design, focusing on how data was collected and analyzed.

### **Qualitative Design**

I chose to design my research project in such a way as to examine the unique experiences of a specific university and its social work field supervisors surrounding disruptions in field placements. This study utilized a qualitative research design. Creswell (2009) defined qualitative research as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Using a qualitative methodology has allowed my research participants to develop and create their own meaning regarding how they experienced underperforming social work students in the field placement setting. Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, and Davidson (2002) argued that qualitative research “needs to draw on different perspectives, methodologies and techniques to generate breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding” (p. 717). I chose to interview field supervisors and one faculty consultant in order to develop a better understanding of the gatekeeping phenomenon in social work field placements from their perspectives.

Qualitative research is often used in social work research as it “aspires to understand people and their social environments in ways that are close as possible to normal human experience by studying them in their natural settings” (Tutty et al., 1996, p. IV). One of the main

purposes of utilizing a qualitative research design in social work is that it allows for data to be influenced by the experiences and priorities of the research participants instead of standardized measurements (Tutty et al., 1996). Qualitative research can be viewed through a humanistic lens as it engages participants in academic studies in their own environment and allows for individuals to contribute their own meaning to whatever phenomenon is being studied.

O'Connor and O'Neill (2004) argued that social work is committed to the promotion of social justice, inclusion and giving people a voice whereas qualitative research offers possibilities for putting this particular commitment into action. Qualitative research must always tell the story of the project at hand, richly convey the voice of the research participants, and detail the implications associated with the study (Drisko, 2005). Miller (1994) identified three core steps of conducting qualitative analysis which consisted of deciding on an organizing system, reducing the raw data and making salient connections. The themes that emerged from this study will give voice to some of the issues facing field supervisors when experiencing underperforming students.

### **Research Question**

The primary research question that I have attempted to address throughout this study was the following: what are the experiences of field supervisors when they encounter underperforming students during their field placements? A semi-structured interview included the following questions that were taken from the Luhanga et al. 2014 study:

1. In your experience as a field supervisor (past or present), have you ever experienced an underperforming student during a field placement or practicum?
2. Could you please describe the situation and outcome?

3. While experiencing an underperforming field placement student, did you receive any assistance? If so, what kind of assistance did you receive?
4. Do you think that there are factors in place that prevent field supervisors from failing students?
5. Do you feel that students may pass their field placements even when their performance may have been questionable?
6. What kind of factors do you think need to be implemented in order to prevent underperforming students from passing their field placements?
7. Do you have any suggestions or comments for schools of social work?

### **Researcher Interest**

My interest in gatekeeping developed out of a graduate teaching assistantship that occurred in 2010 at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario. Part of my graduate teaching assistantship involved conducting research interviews for a research project titled: *Exploring the issue of failure to fail in professional education programs: A multidisciplinary study* (Luhanga et al., 2014).

This study examined the perceptions of field supervisors, preceptors, faculty consultants, and faculty members in a variety of multidisciplinary programs such as nursing, education, and social work. I was able to conduct interviews using a predetermined set of interview questions with social work field supervisors, placement coordinators and faculty members, which not only provided me with relevant experience in being able to conduct interviews, it also allowed me to learn how to transcribe interviews. Since I had already completed some preliminary research surrounding how undergraduate social work programs enforce gatekeeping measures in field placements, I decided to continue with this topic at the suggestion of one of my thesis



supervisors, Dr. Leigh MacEwan. I chose to alter my thesis slightly by primarily focusing my research on how field supervisors experience underperforming or unsuitable students during social work field placements.

As a social work student, I experienced a number of issues in my very first placement while completing my Bachelor of Social Work at an Ontario university. It is important to note that these issues had nothing to do with the strength and quality of the guidance that my field supervisor provided, but were strictly situational. Since the onus was on the student to find and secure a field placement, I felt that if I were to terminate a field placement, not only would I be in danger of losing the hours I had already put into my placement, but I would also have to restart the exhausting search of trying to find another field placement. During this time, I received sufficient support from the field placement coordinator; however, I felt like I was stuck with very little options due to the lack of available agencies that were willing to take social work students in the rural and northern regions of Ontario. The issues ended up being rectified over time, but at that point I had already contacted another agency that was willing to take on a social work student. I was fortunate to be able to divide my compulsory placement hours into two placement settings and this I feel actually provided me with an opportunity to garner additional experience from two completely different social service agencies. It is important to note that what I may have experienced at my own field placement cannot be generalized to every field placement situation.

### **Methods/Research Design**

**Data Collection.** In order to begin data collection, a 25-page research proposal had to be developed and put on display in the social work office for ten days, as a requirement by the Laurentian University Social Work committee. After approval had been received from the Social

Work committee, the next step was to get approval from the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board (REB). Various modifications to the thesis proposal were required in order to receive REB approval, and on May 10, 2012 approval was officially granted. Data was collected through (1) a Demographic Questionnaire (See Appendix D); and (2) Ten individual semi-structured 1 to 1.5 hours interviews (See Appendix E).

The contact information of two field placement coordinators for a rural and northern school of social work was then provided by my thesis supervisors. After introducing myself to the contacts in an initial email as a MSW student conducting a research project on gatekeeping and social work, they were asked if they would be able to provide a current list of field supervisors that had supervised their students. I was given the contact information for university field supervisors in June, 2012, and began contacting potential research participants. Initially, the response rate to my research project was rather low. Conducting research in northern and rural regions of Ontario can present certain challenges (Lightfoot, Strasser, Maar, & Jacklin, 2008). Researchers may experience a variety of challenges such as apprehension surrounding having to travel through northern climates during the winter; dealing with different cultural practices; and a lack of personal resources (Lightfoot et al., 2008). Another challenge to conducting research is that sometimes researchers may know their research participants and may have to effectively deal with the possibility of dual relationships (Halverson & Brownlee, 2010). Contacting potential research participants during the summer was not the most appropriate time to do so as most people take time off and it was necessary to work around a number of supervisors' vacation schedules in order to procure an interview with them.

When scheduling potential interviews, if research participants were unable to participate in a face-to-face interview then a telephone interview could be conducted. Some interviews were

conducted over Skype, a software application that allows people to make telephone calls over the internet. Upon verbal and written permission, the telephone interview was then audio-recorded through KishKash Sam, a Skype plug-in that records conversations. Each interview was transcribed verbatim for analysis and took over five months to complete the transcription process. I conducted my first interview in July, 2012, and finished my tenth interview in November 2012.

**Data Analysis.** The type of data analysis used was the six-step approach designed by Tutty et al. (1996). This particular method was used for the subsequent data analysis as it allowed for a particular method from which to organize the information that I had acquired during data collection and then come up with the relevant themes and interpretations that addressed the primary research question. The steps taken for analyzing the data included the following:

1. The data was prepared in transcript form. Each interview was audio-recorded using a tape recorder or a digital recording device that was built into the researcher's computer. Each interview that was conducted over the computer was taped with a cassette recorder as well in order to ensure that there would always be at least one working recording. Five interviews were recorded in person while five interviews were recorded using Skype and a digital recording device. Nine interviews were transcribed and assistance was required on transcribing the last interview because the audio quality of the tape recording was not very clear and a second opinion was needed. By transcribing the majority of the interviews, familiarity with what each participant had conveyed in their individual interviews began to develop. Common themes as well as differences amongst the raw data began to surface very early on in the data analysis stage. Each research participant

was assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes using the numbers 1 through 10 based on the order from which they were interviewed.

2. The second step according to Tutty et al. (1996) included establishing a plan for data analysis. After completing the transcription of all ten interviews, each interview was thoroughly reviewed in order to become more familiar with the data. While reading through each transcript, certain quotes began to stand out in terms of their applicability to the research topic. Two photocopies of each interview were made; one in a small font while the other copy was in a much bigger font. Colored highlighters were utilized and common themes, differences and memorable quotes were highlighted using different colors. Highlighted excerpts were then cut out from each interview into specific categories in order to begin finding common themes and observations. A large work surface was used where all initial categories were laid out to get a better picture of all the raw categorized data that been collected in order to begin the next step of the data analysis.
3. While completing the first-level coding of the interviews, all meaningful excerpts from each interview were put into assigned categories. A very useful file system was created where each excerpt was placed into a file folder based on common similarities and differences. Once this process was completed, themes began to be assigned to each of these categories. After this step was completed, the work was then reviewed in order to ensure accuracy and to double check that the chosen themes accurately reflected what each participant had said during their individual interviews.
4. While completing the second-level coding, all the excerpts from each individual category were analyzed in an attempt to find common similarities as well as differences. During

this process, each interview reread to make sure that each excerpt that had been created out of the ten interviews accurately captured what each research participant was attempting to convey. After sorting the excerpts into specific categories, each category was then integrated into themes and sub-themes.

5. The next step involved interpreting data and theory building. At this point, relationships began to emerge between the major salient themes in the research. In order to achieve this step in the data analysis, a charting system was created where every time a theme had been duplicated, contradicted or reframed it was marked down.
6. The last step according to Tutty et al. (1996) involved assessing the trustworthiness of the research results. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the study's qualitative data, triangulation and member checking were utilized to make sure the results were both objective and credible. Triangulation was chosen as a way to check and establish validity by utilizing a consent form with very specific parameters. As part of the consent form that was created, a section was included that involved research participants giving their email addresses if they wanted to be sent a copy of the research findings. All ten participants provided their email address in order to receive a copy of the research findings. This process utilized member checking as participants would receive a copy of the research findings, and if they disagreed with anything that had been written, they could contact the researcher who would then make the subsequent changes.

**Target Population.** The target population who were interviewed was field placement supervisors who had worked with placement students from a rural and northern region of Ontario. This specific target population is unique from urban areas of the province. Lightfoot et

al. (2008) argued that people from these particular geographical locations are “often highly value self sufficiency, self reliance, and independence, coupled with stoicism” (p. 507).

**Recruitment.** In the initial email sent to potential field supervisors, a Recruitment Flyer (see Appendix A) and a Letter of Introduction (see Appendix C) were forwarded as attachments to all the potential research participants. The email identified the study as an MSW thesis, described the study, and provided contact information (see Appendix B). Interested field supervisors were emailed the Consent Form (Appendix D), the Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix E), and the Semi-Structured Interview Questions (Appendix F) so that they could get a better understanding of what exactly my research project was attempting to address as well as the type of commitment that would be asked of them. From the two separate lists that I had been given from each university campus, about 20% of the email addresses that I had been given surrounding potential field placement supervisors were invalid.

**Sampling.** The sample method used to recruit potential research participants was purposive sampling with an emphasis on a criterion technique. Criterion sampling “involves searching for cases or individuals who meet a certain criteria, e.g. that they have a certain disease or a particular life experience” (Palys, 2006, p. 2). The criterion for the study was based solely on finding those individuals who had supervised a social work student either currently, or, in the past, from rural or northern Ontario and were willing to share their experiences. The study focused on finding individuals who had all experienced an underperforming social work student in the field placement setting.

**Setting.** Semi-structured face-to-face and/or telephone interviews took place at a date, time, and location that was at the discretion and convenience of my research participants. Five interviews took place in the northern region while the other five interviews took place throughout

a rural region of central Ontario. The five interviews that took place with research participants from the northern region occurred over the telephone whereas the other five interviews from a rural region of central Ontario area took place in a face-to-face interview. For the interviews that occurred face-to-face, the setting for all of these interviews took place at the individual research participants' respective places of employment, which included a myriad of social service agencies and/or organizations.

**Ethical Considerations.** The Laurentian University Research Ethics Board (REB) approval was received for this study. Since my thesis topic was based on having research participants share their experiences surrounding how they dealt with underperforming social work students in field placements, having to recall memories may have a potential impact on those participating in an interview. At the time of the individual interviews, each participant was asked to sign a Consent Form (Appendix D) in order to participate. The Consent Form included information surrounding confidentiality and anonymity and how it would be maintained at all times throughout this project. Since five of the ten interviews occurred over the telephone, research participants either emailed or mailed me their signed Consent Forms.

As mentioned previously, ethical issues could potentially arise when conducting interviews with individuals who may have had negative experiences surrounding underperforming or unsuitable students during field placements. Since having to recall past experiences could cause some sort of discomfort while being interviewed, extra precautions needed to be taken in order to receive ethics approval and perform ethical research. This included letting participants know that they could refuse to answer any questions, take a break, or stop the interview at any time without penalty. During the beginning of each interview, research participants were informed that I was a BSW graduate with training in crisis intervention in case

any issues should arise surrounding having to recall past experiences. Each participant was provided with a list of available community resources and phone numbers, if for some reason they happened to need it. Participants were also directed to resources within their own catchment areas, if research participants felt any type of discomfort as a result of having to talk about a negative experience.

As a way to decrease any hesitancy or anxiety on the part of those participating in the research project, it was communicated to all participants that pseudonyms would be assigned to each research participant. It was also expressed in the consent form that any type of identifying factors that could connect research participants to the study would not be published, such as information regarding participants' names, the agency that they work for, the type of work that they do, the name of the underperforming student and any other kind of identifying information within the breadth of this study. Lastly, all data from the interviews including any handwritten notes and audiotapes were to be stored in a locked cabinet in the Laurentian University office of Dr. Janet Yorke, for a period of five years after the study was completed. At the end of five years, all written data and audiotapes were to be destroyed.



### **Chapter Three: Results**

A total of ten interviews were conducted over a five-month period between July and November, 2012. All ten interviews lasted between forty-five minutes to one hour and were recorded verbatim and then transcribed at a later date. The main research question that this qualitative study attempted to address was: *what is the experience of social work field supervisors when they encounter underperforming students during their field placements?* First, I will discuss the results of the demographic questionnaire, then I will report the qualitative findings that were provided from the semi-structured interviews. From the analyzed data, five salient themes, as well as sub-themes emerged, and will be discussed in the section below.

#### **Demographic Results**

Ten interviews with nine field supervisors and one faculty consultant from different organizations throughout the northern and rural regions of Ontario were conducted. At the beginning of each interview, I had a series of demographic questions that I asked each individual research participant (see Appendix D) and the following results were recorded. Out of the ten participants who took part in a research interview, two were male while eight were female. Five research participants were from the northern region whereas the other five were from the rural area of central Ontario. Eight participants had an educational background in the social work field whereas the remaining two had received Bachelor degrees in Science and Education. Out of the eight participants who had degrees in social work, all eight of them had received their MSW at some point in their careers. Nine research participants worked in the field of social work ranging in areas such as addiction, domestic abuse, mental health and other social services. These nine participants provided face-to-face counseling in the organizations that they worked for and were able to accommodate having field placement students to gain experience in the direct field of

social work, including as counseling. The tenth research participant worked in the area of social policy and did not provide face-to-face counseling.

In summary, the ten research participants that were selected and interviewed for this particular study on gatekeeping and social work had a combined experience of over 144 years of supervising field placement students. It is also important to note that the ten research participants who volunteered to take part in an interview had supervised a combined total of over 175 social work field placement students throughout their respective careers. These ten participants spoke directly about having experienced a situation where issues arose surrounding the performance of a social work field placement student from the participating university.

### **Qualitative Results**

A qualitative approach was used when analyzing the data from the transcribed interviews as it best describes the particular phenomenon surrounding how field supervisors experience unsuitable student behaviours in field placements. The six themes that emerged out of the analyzed data include self-awareness of the field supervisor, determining suitability, student behaviours, coping styles, university and agency support, and failure to fail.

**Self-awareness of the field supervisor.** The first salient theme that emerged from the analyzed data of this study surrounding gatekeeping and social work centered on the self-awareness of the field supervisor. All ten participants spoke to varying degrees about how self-aware they were when encountering an underperforming field placement student; however, some participants may have used other words to describe what they were experiencing such as “I felt...”, “I experienced...”, “I was...”. Four participants reported that they were aware of the impact that dealing with an underperforming field placement student had on both their personal and professional lives. These four participants reported experiencing feelings of both guilt and

anxiety when having to contact the participating university regarding an underperforming student. Participant #1 indicated that she did not “feel good at all... because it puts her back... and I did not feel like I gave her the help, the guidance that she deserved”. Participant #2 reported “I guess some people feel like if they fail the student and the student loses whatever time they have put into their placement, there is a kind of guilt associated with failing students as well”. Participant #6 talked about how she understood why there was hesitancy in going to the university regarding a student’s behaviour as she reported “I would never want to fail someone, I mean they have gone four years and have invested a lot of money into their education”. Lastly, the final participant spoke directly to her trepidation in contacting the participating university as she indicated in her interview “I don’t want to be the bad person”.

All ten participants talked about how aware they were regarding the impact that this situation had on their professional lives. There appeared to be a real hesitancy in speaking about the direct impact that these particular experiences had on their emotional and mental wellbeing. In all ten interviews conducted for this study, only four research participants spoke succinctly about the emotional impact that experiencing an underperforming student had on them and used adjectives such as “stressful” and “difficult” to describe how they were feeling during this specific time in their supervisory careers. In total, all four participants used the term “stressful” a variety of different times in their individual interviews. The first participant used the term “stressful” five different times throughout her interview, the second participant used the term “stressful” three times, the third participant spoke about the situation being “stressful” two times and the last participant used the term only once. All four of these participants used the term “stressful” when describing the impact that experiencing an underperforming field placement

student had on them both personally and on their paid work load and their willingness to take social work field placement students in the future.

One participant reported that due to the clash between herself and the participating university's faculty consultant, she did "not feel good at all" when dealing with an underperforming placement student. She stated that she did not know what happened after her student had finished her placement and had received a failing recommendation from her agency. This participant had experienced an underperforming student early on in her social work career and spoke about how she did not feel either prepared or experienced enough to be able to delve further into the personal issues that she felt her student was experiencing at the time of her placement. The participant indicated that she felt like she needed to "respect boundaries". This participant reported that her placement student had disclosed to her that she had been going through some personal issues that were obviously interfering with her work and "addressing issues is very important but if the student graduates and issues do crop up, they might not be in a setting where the supervisor is willing to do that". The participant acknowledged her role as a supervisor and wanted to stay away from becoming her counselor. The participant indicated in her interview that if she had spoken to her placement student about some of the issues that had been directly impacting her quality of work then she would have felt like she was overstepping her role as her placement supervisor.

One research participant spoke about her awareness of just how much extra work was created as a result of having to deal with an underperforming field placement student and the toll that it took on her own social work career. She found that when experiencing an underperforming student there ends up being "more time and energy dedicated to that student, that the student is not spending on class and the agency is not spending on work". This

participant was both conscious of the time and the effort that it took to support an underperforming student and the drain that it can also take on the field supervisor.

Another participant spoke about how seriously she takes her role as a field supervisor as she does not want it “to come back and bite you”. She stated that she tries to prepare her students to the best of her ability in order to get them to where they need to be:

Because ultimately you are going to have to be working with them. Is my colleague at one agency or my dear friend who works in another area going to call me and say what did you do?

Feedback from these interviews indicated that those supervisors who spoke to varying degrees about their own self-awareness were also able to speak directly and succinctly about the impact that experiencing an underperforming field placement student had on both their personal and professional lives. While analyzing the theme of self-awareness, confliction as a sub-theme began to emerge. Participants who disclosed how they felt while experiencing issues associated with their placement students, also touched upon feelings associated with confliction. Confliction is a sub-theme that was derived out of the overarching self-awareness theme.

***Confliction.*** Half of the participants reported that they struggled with the conflicting roles of grading a student on performance while also responding to the student’s struggle with personal issues, completion of tasks and/or learning contract objectives. Four participants from this study reported that they were willing to sit down with an underperforming student and modify their learning contract if the student was experiencing difficulties in terms of getting specific projects completed while also responding to personal issues going on in their lives at the same time. One participant explained that if a student is experiencing a crisis in their personal life or having trouble completing all the tasks set out in their learning contract, modifying these

contracts can give students the time to concentrate on fewer tasks and this may end up positively affecting their placement performance and helping them to ultimately pass. The participant explained "...I think you need to accommodate it, you can't just say okay we talked about it... So this has happened, how much of this contract do you think you can do, maybe sitting in on interviews isn't the right thing now. I know that's part of your learning contract but let's focus on other valuable learning but that's not likely to trigger anything". Participant #1 stated that "so whenever I interview students, or students interview me, something I talk to them about it in terms if I notice you are having a hard time, you know or their client's involved in alcohol, so I sit with them and ask if they are okay if we do this type of work or do you need to sit this out?". Participant #5 discussed how she had a placement student who appeared to have some personal problems going on and "we gave [the student] an opportunity to make up the hours that were missed and to do some extra work". Participant #7 stated "since we do monitor students, if they are not achieving, we look at why and modify". Participant #7 also remarked that "this is a conversation that we have and for them to think about the consequences and lose credit. And maybe this is underachieving in a sense of their learning contract and getting their stuff done but we try to balance that too". She added that "the only thing that I have encountered is that the personal meets the work, and that is when they are not achieving their potential...I never ask directly if they have had experience with [organizational mandate]. I do not ask them directly because that is none of my business". Participant #10 reported that in the past he has had to sit down with a placement student and modify their learning contract "though it wasn't the student's fault". This participant spoke about how he had a student who due to no fault of his own could not accomplish a certain learning goal "as for instance, the one thing a student might like to do is

sit in on interviews with other social workers, and maybe the other social workers just won't cooperate".

One participant reported that practicing from a strengths-based perspective while supervising an underperforming student is something that could be accomplished in the day-to-day tasks of supervision and can help negate some of the conflicted feelings that field placement supervisors may encounter: however, the key is to always be proactive. The participant stated that:

".... I mean for instance when I see a student struggling, an unsatisfactory mark should have been addressed before the final evaluation process, uh, you know the student doesn't know they are being unsatisfactory and that is what they are here to learn.... If the supervisor is not confident in their own self then they really shouldn't be supervising.

If you truly believe in strengths-based, then you have to compensate for weaknesses too".

Another participant reported that she understood fully why it would be difficult for someone to fail a student, as she stated: "I wouldn't want that decision to rest solely on my shoulders".

Similarly another participant reported that: "if the relationship with the supervisor is a solid and trusting one then that student knows that she or he can make some errors".

**Determining suitability.** The second salient theme to come out of the analyzed data from this study involves how field supervisors utilize a variety of different screening tools when determining field placement suitability. Participants said that screening tools play a very important function when it comes to choosing social work placement students and their compatibility for a particular agency or organization. One participant recalled an experience where a prospective placement student took control of the initial interview. The participant stated that:

“...The interview was very different than before. Usually I am the one who questions and checks things out, but now she was the one checking me out.... So something like that is a relief because I say hmm. Chances are she is not going to fail, I am not going to have to fail her”.

Similarly, Tam (2003) argued that the gatekeeping function has shifted from screening at admissions to screening during the pre-practicum phase and that the gatekeeping responsibility has come to fall on field supervisors.

In terms of determining suitability through pre-practicum screening, participant #5 stated “I personally do a lot interviewing and contact before someone comes on board. I ask very bold, blunt questions”. Screening tools are put in place by field supervisors and their agencies in order to prevent unsuitable students from completing their placement in an area that does not fit their particular needs or learning objectives. One participant stated “I wasn’t prepared to invest in someone who wasn’t really interested in being here or was driven by a different agenda”. She went on to explain that during pre-placement interviews, she has had students express interest in areas that were not covered by her organization so she then “connected with colleagues to give that individual student some additional ideas for their placement”. Since field placement students are often given the opportunity to interact with clients and other vulnerable members of the population on a daily basis, field placement agencies must be assured that a student is both safe and confident in their own abilities to be able to work with different client populations at any given time. Participant #7 stated that it really comes down to “a matter of confidence of the student” when determining field placement suitability.

All of the research participants that were interviewed for this study reported that they conducted pre-practicum screening when selecting potential social work field placement



students. All ten research participants reported that they would ask their potential placement students to send in a resume as well as come to their organization for a face-to-face interview before they were actually given a field placement opportunity. Participant #10 recalled how it took nearly three years of convincing his agency to take a placement student before he was able to contact the participating university. This participant reported "...I was on holidays and so this student was selected by my boss and when I came back from holidays, he was like here you go, you got a student, this is what you wanted, so there you go". The research participant expressed that there had been virtually no screening process involved in making sure the placement student that was chosen was actually a good fit for his organization. Since the research participant had been away on vacation when his placement student was selected, he felt that the issues that had subsequently developed ended up being a direct correlation to the placement student's performance and could have been prevented if the right prescreening questions had been asked by his agency at the time of his placement student's initial interview. Participant #10 stated:

"You know, an individual comes into the interview thinking that they can get a lot out of the placement, like well maybe their expectations are not quite meeting the expectations of my agency. That's how things can get kind of figured out; well maybe this is not exactly what you are looking for".

Six research participants reported that the initial prescreening interview provided the opportunity for potential students and their field supervisors to decide whether or not the particular placement opportunity being offered was the best fit for both parties. One participant recalled that when she conducts an interview with a potential placement student, she will often "see where they are at, what their expectations are, and where their commitments and interests lie as well". Another participant spoke about how "it is a combination of experience in a

previous placement and um, readiness to do real work” that she looks for as specific criteria when selecting potential field placement students. The participants indicated that during the pre-placement phase, they attempted to implement screening measures when interviewing students in an attempt to try and circumvent having to experience an underperforming or ill matched student in the actual field placement. Despite the enactment of these specific screening tools, respondents still experienced an underperforming field placement student.

In the ten analyzed interviews, there appears to be a real consistency amongst all research participants in ensuring that the values, expectations and learning goals of a potential field placement student are in line with the mandate of the placement agency and/or organization that is offering the placement opportunity. Four research participants recalled how they did not want to waste the time of a potential placement student in providing them with a placement opportunity that they simply were not interested in. As one said, “We have had some students who have decided that this placement is not what they want”. A variety of participants highlighted that they were very conscious of not wanting to waste their own time as well as the resources of the agency/organization that they worked for. Another participant said “it’s usually us who have communicated through email that their correspondence is not really doing it”. Four participants spoke about how they had to turn down potential field placement students with an opportunity to work with them as they felt that the student’s goals or learning objectives were not in line with the type of work that the agency was able to provide. When interviewing potential field placement students, one participant reported the following:

“So in this current environment, I will ask how their lives have been touched by \_\_\_\_\_ (confidential information has been omitted) and really push on that and want to know the details in sharing those details, it allows me to see how they are processing and if they

have processed or not their life experience and whether or not they are going to be a good fit here and whether or not this is going to be a trigger or not. Um, and then I find too in addition I make them come in for an interview, I make them send in a resume, have a phone conversation, have a tour... Uh, I approach it that they are more or less interviewing us so what do you need to know for this to be a good placement and I find in those conversations how they articulate themselves gives me a pretty clear sense of how strong a student they are”.

Another participant spoke about how she has had potential field placement students decide on their own accord that the particular field placement opportunity that she was offering through her agency “just wasn’t for them”. This participant recalled how it was the students themselves who decided on their own accord that they would have to look at other options regarding finding suitable placement opportunities in other areas of expertise or at other organizations. This participant provided an example of a conversation that took place with a prospective student where she had outlined some of the issues that had the potential to crop up in counseling sessions. She stated:

“Due to some of the self-harming behaviors that take place here... I said do you think this would be overwhelming for you and would you be able to be present. And after a little further discussion, she [the prospective student] agreed that it probably was not the placement for her”.

The word “selective” was used numerous times in two different interviews when describing the manner in which field supervisors screened and offered placement opportunities to social work students. One research participant reported that she has “always been and still am very selective on the students I work with”. She goes on to state that during an interview with a

potential placement student, she will look “at the students strengths and goals, what they are wanting to accomplish to learn. And if it fits with my style, um and if they are comfortable with my style of supervising”. The second research participant reported that she is also very “selective” when it comes to choosing potential placement students as she reported:

“Unfortunately I do not have the luxury of time for a student who needs let’s say handholding. I need someone who is calm, independent and um, possibly with a third year placement they have a bit of experience. Some may have worked summer jobs in the field so that is why I am very selective which may help that, you know the fact that I had only one that really was an underperformer”.

When asked specifically about the type of questions that are utilized when screening students during the initial interview phase, one participant responded that he recalled asking a rather memorable question to a potential field placement student. The question that this participant asked centered on whether or not the student might experience transference issues as a result of the student obtaining a placement position at his organization. As the participant recalled:

“I do know that one of the questions I did ask her is whether she thought that there might be transference issues? I do remember her specifically because um, I don’t remember the details, but I remember specifically her talking about family members that were struggling with addiction”.

Another research participant spoke about how she is now much more cognizant of the impact that her work can have on potential placement students and will make sure that any potential student that comes to do their placement at her agency is both emotionally and mentally prepared to be able to work with the specific clientele that her agency serves. This research

participant recalled in her interview that she has now developed certain criteria into her initial interview process when selecting students in order to address the possibility that there could be a threat of becoming emotionally triggered as a result of hearing or seeing something at her particular organization. As the participant stated in her interview:

“There is a lot of stuff in the counseling sessions that the student hears and works with that can trigger personal issues. Um so, whenever I interview students or students interview me, that’s something I talk to them about in terms of if I notice you are having a hard time, you know or their clients involved in alcohol, so I sit with them and ask are you okay with this type of work on the side?”

All ten research participants asked a variety of different questions during the pre-screening interview when selecting potential research participants, yet despite the utilization of this screening tool, all ten participants have experienced an underperforming field placement student at some point in their careers which as the majority reported only worked to strengthen their initial screening tools when interviewing potential field placement students.

**Student behaviours.** The third salient theme to come out of the analyzed data involves the type of student behaviours that have led to field placement underperformance and disruption. Some of the student behaviours that were reported by the ten research participants from this study included showing up late for placement, not respecting confidentiality and client boundaries, calling in sick on a regular basis, poor work ethics, interpersonal conflict with field placement supervisors and/or other organizational staff, lack of empathy and poor use of self-disclosure. One participant spoke about how there appears to be an ongoing trend where social work students are not being taught the legal and ethical issues surrounding getting important documentation signed such as release of information and consent forms. She goes on to state

that: “what we are finding is that we are having students who have no idea that they need to get a third party release signed or how to get consent forms signed for clients”. This participant disclosed that she has been finding it really challenging working with students who are coming into her agency and how they are simply not being professionally prepared to be able to work effectively with clients. Similarly another participant spoke about how in her own agency, she has become “a good dumping ground for the underperforming student, maybe because of having a background in special needs and people with disabilities of different kinds”. She also spoke about another situation that occurred at her agency in which:

“There was a student who started working with a different field instructor and it wasn’t going well. Um, they were having trouble focusing and achieving the goals set out in the organization. I think part of the problem was that the student wasn’t all that interested in the population that they were assigned to, um, and they preferred working with a younger population like children. I think the volume of work and the need for structure was too much for them and the other field instructor was not accommodating in what I would consider, I don’t want to say special needs, but different types of learning styles”.

This research participant accepted the student who was underperforming in another department and transferring the student to her own department where she reported that the ..... social work student flourished.

One research participant spoke about how when she encounters students who are having trouble with completing specific tasks set out in the learning contract, she will sit down with the student and modify the learning contract in order to get everything completed. This participant reported how her students will often run into difficulties when it comes to their personal relationships as a result of completing their placement at her agency and learning about healthy

boundaries and coping styles. She raised the issue in her interview regarding whether this was indeed an actual issue or part of the learning process of completing a placement at her particular agency as she spoke about one situation in which her placement student had to take a week off in order to deal with a personal situation. The participant reported that she did not think that her placement student “was underperforming in that sense because she learned so much and was actually able to use the system. She used the police. She used the court. She used everything. So you know she lived it and unfortunately she got her life experience through that”.

Another issue that may develop that could potentially lead to placement underperformance and disruption is when a student becomes traumatized or triggered by something that occurs at their field placement and is simply unable to work through it. All ten participants reported that they had experienced an underperforming student at some point in their career who was not performing well as a result of going through some type of personal issue. One participant spoke to the importance of addressing personal issues; however, she went on to state that: “if the student graduates and issues do crop up in the workplace, they might not be in a setting where their supervisor is willing to do that”. Similarly another participant reported that: “lots of stuff that a student hears in counseling sessions could trigger personal issues”. As a way to prevent this from happening to her placement students, this respondent would “introduce a little bit of the personal counseling into supervision but with boundaries”. Another participant spoke about how she would refer a student who was having difficulties to another organization in the surrounding area, as it would be a conflict of interest if the student were to receive services from the organization from which she was completing her placement. This particular participant raised an interesting point when discussing past students who had experienced personal issues at her agency and had disclosed these said issues to her. When asked whether or not the

participating university had been notified, the participant reported that she did not contact the university due to issues surrounding confidentiality on her part. She stated “yeah it’s her choice to share her struggles, not mine... The coordinator probably had a good idea what was going on, but again we had to respect her [the student’s] confidentiality”.

In terms of the types of student behaviours that lead to field placement underperformance, one participant reported that he had experienced a student who took on way too much work during her placement and ended up experiencing a bit of a breakdown in the last three weeks as a result. He stated that he had identified a number of issues throughout her placement such as “negativity towards clients, negativity towards myself as well as other staff, complaining about me to other social workers and an abundant amount of time-off requests”. He reported that it was not until the last three weeks of this particular student’s placement when things became quite unbearable as “...there was this complete burnout, where she stated that she was burned out and exhausted and that of course ended up being my fault as she accused me of working her too hard”.

Similarly another participant spoke about how she suspected that there were some transference issues going on with one of her placements students as she felt that the student was checking out during client counseling sessions as it may have been something that was too painful for her to hear. When the issue was brought up in a weekly meeting, the student completely denied that there was anything going on in her life. Therefore, it became difficult for this participant to address any underperformance issues when her field placement student was denying that there was anything going on that was impacting her performance. Lastly, another participant reported that she had encountered an underperforming student who had “some unresolved personal issues going that were creating barriers for her to be able to really



participate in placement and she was getting triggered”. This participant said she had to broach the subject of social work suitability to the student and whether or not the timing was appropriate for her for to complete her degree.

One participant reported that at her agency, she expects her students to come to her to tell her that they are not having a good day. When placement students go through her initial orientation session, this participant goes on to report that she will let her students know what kind of expectations will be required from them in order to achieve a successful placement. She states:

“On many occasions, even with the most recent five students, um, they have things going on in their personal lives, and they will come and they will tell us because that is the expectation. Um, today is not a good day or I don’t think that I can be out there and be engaging with people because there is this big lecture happening so I am going to work on a project at my desk, is that okay? Yeah, I will be more upset if they don’t come to me because if you cannot be present and be very available for the people we support, then I take issue with that”.

Participants from this study reported a link between student behaviours and the use of self-care and debriefing. The use of self-care and debriefing is a sub-theme that is derived out of the student behaviours theme.

***The use of self-care and debriefing.*** All ten participants in this study reported that they had experienced a student at some point in their careers who had been going through a personal issue as a result of being triggered by something that they witnessed at their field placement. Participant #7 spoke about how her weekly meetings provide her field placement students with the opportunity to be able to voice any concerns they may have, as she stated “...I try to keep the

weekly meetings as I am really keen to address potential issues that might crop up”. One participant defined student burnout as when students “stop listening and they reject your advice and your observations”. Similarly another participant reported that she gives her placement students her home phone number and encourages them to call her if they are ever experiencing an issue at their placement that they need to talk to somebody about. She goes on to state that:

“I don’t want you to go home and just be devastated from what you heard. I mean don’t call me at 2:00 am but do call me at 10:30 pm because we just wrapped up group and I don’t want you to sit with that or if you can hang on till the morning, great. I want you to phone me as soon as possible and talk to me about it”.

Another participant stated that: “Part of self-care is also being accountable in my opinion, so I provide opportunities for my students to debrief and I am always very available. My door is always open, very rarely is it closed... I am hoping that the culture of self-care is becoming very different. I hope that it is something that is evolving, and I think that self-care is instrumental to part of the placement experience”. Similarly another participant also brought up self-care during his interview, as he stated that he makes his placement students “do some reading on self-care, do some research on self-care, implement something into their lives and we really, really encourage the self-care big time”. The majority of participants indicated in their interviews that providing opportunities for self-care and debriefing are very important mechanisms for placement students in order to help prevent student burnout. The participants from this study identified the importance of giving students the space and time to debrief with their field supervisors if they happen to witness something at their field placements that in turn triggers a personal crisis.

**Coping styles.** The fourth salient theme to come out of the analyzed data involves the different types of coping styles that the participants had at their disposal when experiencing an underperforming field placement student. All ten of the research participants that took part in this study reported that they had to deal with the dilemma of having to figure what to do when faced with an underperforming student. This can become particularly problematic when the field supervisor also has to contend with completing the daily tasks of their job as well. Five participants reported that they relied on the belief that they were protecting the quality of the social work profession by raising concerns regarding their underperforming field placement students.

Participant #1 reported that she was able to cope with the stress of encountering an underperforming field placement student by using a strengths based approach when evaluating her student's unsatisfactory performance. Participant #1 said she had noticed certain areas in which her placement student excelled at and would purposefully ask her student to partake in more of these learning opportunities as the respondent knew that the outcome would most likely be positive.

Participant #2 reported that she once had a placement student who had disclosed to her that he was experiencing some mental health issues that were negatively impacting his field placement performance. In consultation with her field placement student, participant #2 decided that the best outcome would be for her student to cut back on his placement hours. So instead of having her student come in five days a week, they both decided that he would only come in for three. At three days a week, participant #2 reported that her student was "much more able to cope and show up to his placement on time in order to take care of himself". Participant #2 remarked that at the participating university, there are virtually no sick days for students who

need to take time off due to an illness or a mental health concern, so if someone was going through some type of difficulty while completing their placement, she points that “you could lose your entire year”. Participant #2’s particular coping style was to consult with her student in order to figure out what would work best for him in the hopes of improving his field placement performance.

In the third interview that took place for this study, participant #3 spoke about how she was able to cope extremely well with how the situation surrounding her underperforming student was managed by both her and the participating university. However it is important to note that participant #3 was a faculty consultant and not a direct supervisor though she had provided supervision to a variety of field supervisors at her current organization as she stated “I was not a direct supervisor but... I would only get involved if there was an issue with one of the students”. Participant #3 stated “at our agency, we have high standards. You’re not coming here to photocopy or to water plants. But you have to be able to function at a certain level and be able to do some in-take”. As a faculty consultant, participant #3 indicated “...with the field consultation, I would only meet with them [students] four times during their placement”. During these meetings, she remarked that there were multiple opportunities for field supervisors and students to bring up any issues that needed to be addressed in order to hopefully find some type of resolution between both parties. When it came to maintaining contact with both field supervisor and student, participant #3 stated “we had regular meetings.... and whatever issues would be addressed at that time”. Participant #3 indicated that when meeting with a particular underperforming placement student, her student “acknowledged that she had been triggered in the middle of a session.... When a student acknowledges there is an issue, it is much easier to work with them”.

During the fourth interview, this particular participant spoke directly about how he was able to cope with the situation of experiencing an underperforming field placement student by having multiple conversations with a variety of people in order to get different views on what was going on. Participant #4 spoke about a particular situation where he and his student had to partake in a teleconference over a lunch period and this did not sit well with the placement student, as the student felt that the meeting interfered with his lunch and actually threatened the field supervisor with bringing this issue up with the labor board. The field supervisor dealt with this situation by consulting his Executive Director and then contacting the faculty consultant from the university. Participant #4 stated that the issues with his placement student's underperformance were continuously taking too much of his time while his student should have been farther along in his placement at that point. The participant reports that: "It was just a matter of well you know, if are you going to continue like this here, you are going to lose your entire placement completely. Do you want to look at other options for you, maybe another option that would better meet your needs as I guess he wasn't meeting the expectations of this agency". Therefore participant #4 dealt with the situation of an underperforming field placement student by utilizing the assistance of both his executive director and the faculty consultant to come up with a variety of options for his underperforming field placement student.

Participant #5 spoke about how she once had a social work placement student who was interested in something completely different than what her agency was able to offer. Participant #5 stated that "it was evident that the student did not want to be there and that the university was a bit desperate in trying to place her as it was already August and they were looking for a placement for her for September". Participant #5 explained how she was able to connect with some of her colleagues to be able to give the placement student some additional ideas for her

placement. Participant #5 was quite adamant in her interview that she did not want to waste her time as well her placement student's if she continued her placement at an agency that she wasn't very interested in. She states in her interview that: "I mean it was August and you have to go with what they were looking for and I reciprocated and said that's not going to happen here". Participant #5 was able to come up with some additional ideas surrounding placement opportunities instead of having the placement student continue at her agency when she really didn't have an interest in the work that was being conducted there in the first place.

Participant #6 dealt with the situation of experiencing an underperforming student by continuing to bring to her student's attention the issues that were taking place as a result of her behavior. Participant #6 reported that: "I honestly felt like that I had a client in my room" when speaking about her underperforming placement student. She reported that part of her coping style was to stay in constant communication with the participating university and had scheduled several meetings with the faculty consultant to try and address the student's behaviour. By the end of the placement, participant #6 "just wanted her out". She explained that she never knew what happened afterwards as to whether or not the student ended up passing her placement, yet she had heard through another placement student at her agency, that the underperforming student had been "bad mouthing herself and her agency".

In the seventh interview that took place for this study, participant #7 reported that due to the personal issues that her placement student was going through at the time of her placement, she had to refer her student to some outside counseling. Participant #7 stated "we just kind of accept it and it doesn't freak us out". Participant #7 explained that her student "kicked some guy out of her house and became a client, but I think she handled it very professionally...she took a week off and she was able to share it with her coordinator". If any staff, volunteers or placements

students were going through issues that were related to the field of work that was conducted at her organization, she would “refer them to the crisis lines of other shelters and support services... there is the agreement that local shelters have that [organizational mandate omitted] so I would call another shelter as I cannot work properly here with my personal crisis taking up counselling time”. The same participant reported that she did not contact the university as she felt that she would be breaching confidentiality by speaking about the personal issues that her placement student had told her in confidence, as she stated “they may not be ready to share that kind of personal with the academic part of their life and it might not be the right thing for me to do either”. Participant #7 spoke about how her placement student was able to navigate effectively through the services that were offered to her as this was something that she had been helping her own clients to do as well. Participant #7 raised an interesting point about her student as she stated “I don’t think it is underperforming in the sense that she learned so much and she actually used the system.... So she lived it and she unfortunately got her life experience out of that”.

Participant #8 had not experienced an underperforming student herself, but actually had taken an underperforming student from another social worker at her agency as she stated “so there was a student who started working with a different field instructor and it wasn’t going well. They were having trouble focusing and achieving the goals set out”. She reported that the need for structure and supervision by this student was something that the previous placement supervisor was unable to meet so in consultation with the faculty consultant, instead of failing the placement student, the student simply switched over to her department. This participant felt like the student needed special accommodation for her particular learning style as well as the student preferred to work with a different population than which she was previously matched.

Since participant #8 had worked with students who had special needs in the past and had developed the requisite experience, she was able to work with this particular placement student to ensure a successful placement experience.

In the ninth interview conducted for this study, participant #9 reported that the way she coped with an underperforming field placement student was to utilize the support of the participating university to try and troubleshoot the issues that were occurring. She reported that in consultation between herself and the university, the student passed the placement because she “had accumulated enough hours and had completed most of the preliminary goals that the contract referred to, and then what she wasn’t successful at, the university stepped in”.

In the final interview that was conducted for this study, participant #10 reported that he was actually forced with having to closely supervise his placement student as he stated: “If I hadn’t been monitoring her really closely, she wouldn’t have gotten her time in and so I was kind of babysitting”. Keeping a watchful eye on his field placement student, the participant stated that he felt that his other duties as a social worker became neglected. He spoke about the dilemma he was faced with in regards to trying to effectively deal with a problematic student while also having to complete his own workload as well. Participant #10 also touched upon how he was able to effectively cope with this additional stressor by having a really supportive manager who always had “his door open”.

### **University and Agency Support**

The fifth theme to come from the analyzed data involved the type of university and agency support that was received when encountering an underperforming student. Three participants from this study indicated in their interviews that they had encountered performance issues related to their social work field placement student, but did not contact the faculty



consultant for assistance or intervention. One participant stated that her students would have to have done something pretty “significant for me to pull in the university”. Participant #2 was the only one who reported that she would not contact the university unless the situation was “really not good”. This participant stated that she tends to grin and bear it unless the situation becomes quite significant, as she states: “so if it’s a threat to anyone who I am responsible for or you know, the student showed up intoxicated or just stopped showing up completely, you know what I mean to the extreme”. Therefore, this participant felt that she would only contact the university unless the situation with the underperforming student became so dire that she would not be able to handle it herself. Another participant indicated confidentiality as a reason why she did not get the university involved. This participant explained how her placement student’s underperformance was a result of “personal issues” and if she were to contact the university she would be breaching her student’s right to confidentiality. The participant described “confidentiality” as the failure to share anything personal that has been disclosed by either students or clients at her organization. Though all three participants had experienced an underperforming student, they did not feel that the situation warranted getting the university involved and ended up trying to resolve the issues on their own.

Three research participants reported that they found the level of assistance from the participating university to be sufficient while experiencing an underperforming student whereas four participants felt that the participating university did not provide them with enough support. Participant #9 indicated “the university and our organization worked very closely in trying to troubleshoot what was going on”.

Participant #10 felt that he received tremendous assistance from both the faculty consultant and the field placement coordinator at the participating university and that he was

very happy with the outcome. He spoke about how his placement student did not actually have an emotional breakdown until the last three weeks of her placement and the decision was to pass her due to all the work that she put into her placement prior to her last three weeks. He explained that he felt completely satisfied with the results because the quality of her work prior to her last three weeks of placement was quite outstanding. He went on to report that the university provided sufficient support in a timely manner and really tried to work with both himself and his organization in order to come up with the best decision regarding the outcome of the underperforming student. One of the most important aspects from this specific interview is that this particular participant felt listened to and supported by his own colleagues as well as the faculty consultant at the participating university and thus had a positive experience even though he was dealing with an underperforming student. He felt that the university did everything they could to ensure that the situation was effectively dealt with. Participant #2 stated that she also felt like she had received sufficient assistance from the participating university. Participant #2 spoke about how the university and her organization worked very closely together to ensure that the process of coming up with the best possible outcome for her student ran as smoothly as possible.

All ten participants reported that if minor issues arose during placement, these would usually get resolved in weekly meetings between field supervisors and students, or during the mid-term evaluation. Participants reported that they felt that they would not contact the university unless the student was not rectifying their behaviour after having been spoken to, or had the student “done something to the extreme” such as breach confidentiality, not show up for their placement, disrespect client boundaries, ask for ongoing time off, etc.

Out of the ten interviews that were conducted for this study, four participants agreed that the participating university did not provide assistance in both a beneficial and timely manner. Though participants #1, #3, #4, and #6 reported that they did not receive sufficient assistance from the university while encountering an underperforming student, all four of them still continued to take placement students from the participating university after their somewhat negative experience. Participant #1 stated “from the school of social work, I did not receive as much [assistance] as I could have, I should have”. The participant later stated “I will teach [the student] but they have to teach me too and give something back. It’s not just I give, give, give and they take, take, take. It’s a mutual give and take”. Participant #1 reported that when she experienced an underperforming student at her agency both her work colleagues and supervisor provided her with sufficient assistance. She felt that the participating university did not provide her with as much support as they could have. During her interview, she explained that without the support of her colleagues and supervisor, she would have not “known what to do” regarding figuring out the outcome for her underperforming student. She stated that the faculty consultant was not “as accessible or as available as he should have been”. Participant #1 explained how there was “a whole clash, like we were not on the same wavelength... so there was a clash between the faculty advisor, supervisor, myself and definitely the student”. This participant also reported that she felt like she was not provided with sufficient support from the university when it also came time for the final evaluation. The recommendation on the final evaluation was for the underperforming student to fail her placement, as the student’s behaviour had been very problematic throughout her placement. This participant reported that the underperforming student was unable to perform at a quality that she typically expects from her placement students due to personal issues that were going on in the student’s life. She stated that she even wrote a

report detailing her reasons for failing the student and sent it to the participating university. She felt that the university decided to pass the student due to it becoming a “bureaucratic kind of thing. And they said that it would be easier to pass her then to have to follow up with the paperwork”.

Participants #3, #4 and #6 reported that instead of hearing from the university regarding the reasons why they decided to pass the student when the participants had recommended a fail, they ended up hearing the outcome through another source. The three field supervisors not only expressed that they felt like their recommendations were not valued by the university, they also raised the ethical dilemma of what did it mean for the field of social work if underperforming students were able to graduate and enter the profession even when their placement performance was questionable. Participants #3, #4 and #6 felt that as a result of not having their failing recommendations followed through with by the participating university, this was the main reason why they did not feel supported. Redmond and Bright (2007) argued that failing to fail underperforming field placement students was directly related to a lack of clear policies governing student behaviour at the university level as well as a fear of opening the university up to possible legal repercussions.

Participant #3 spoke about how she felt that her recommendations were not listened to by the participating university as well. Participant #3 had indicated that her field placement student had been going through some personal issues at the time of her placement, and as a result was always requesting time off and appeared to be really checked out when interacting with clients or sitting in on personal counseling sessions. In response to the university’s involvement, respondent #3 reported that, “I kind of got the feeling like my concerns were not being validated”. Participant #3 said that she had brought up her placement student’s unsatisfactory

performance on numerous occasions with both her student in question and the faculty consultant, but there was never any resolution to the situation at hand. Participant #3 stated “we recommended a fail to the coordinator of the placement but I know for a fact that they didn’t follow our recommendations and they gave her a fail”. When asked how that made participant #3 feel, respondent disclosed that she had been “very upset”.

Evaluations, resources, field manuals and acknowledgment were sub-themes that developed out of the overarching theme of university and agency support. Participants from this study touched upon these four sub-themes when referencing the different kinds of support and assistance that were provided to them from the both the university and the respondents’ own agency.

**Evaluations.** Three participants reported that they would like to see field placement grading change from being a pass/fail system to one that is based on a Likert scale where they could grade the student using a letter system. Three participants indicated that they felt that the current pass/fail system did not leave sufficient space to report on areas that field placement students still needed to work on in order to become more effective social workers. Participant #5 reported that she prefers concrete evaluations and that she would like the participating university to be able to provide a charting system in which they provide examples of where the university feels the student should be at in their third year placement and where they feel the student should be at in their fourth year placement. Participant #5 stated that she feels that the pass/fail system is a “bit of a set-up because really all you need to achieve is a 50% right? There is nobody from ..... [University] I would have given an F to, but I would have graded them differently from A to C”. Similarly another participant reported that she provided feedback to the participating

university in terms of changing their field placement grading system from a pass/fail to something that accommodates areas of improvement, as she states:

“They either satisfy their placement or they don’t satisfy it and there is not an opportunity beyond all the comments, depending on what institutional forms I am filling out to allow for it. But I think it needs to be like a pass with distinction or some sort of grace where I can distinguish the students who have excelled here and those who don’t. If they turned around tomorrow and applied for a job, are the students who floated through their placement getting the same jobs? As an employer this is the stuff that I would want to go back and look at. You know, so how was your placement?”

The next sub-theme that was touched upon by participants from this study involves resources.

**Resources.** Participants from this study reported that they utilized a variety of different resources when experiencing an underperforming student. All ten participants indicated that when their placement students would come in for their first day of orientation, they would always be given the policies and procedures manual from their own organization and/or agency to read. These manuals outlined the organizational mandate, the expectations as well as the type of behaviours that would not be permitted such as breach of confidentiality, harassment, etc. All ten participants felt that by having their field placement students read their own organizations’ policies and procedures manuals, it would help to lay the groundwork for what was to be expected from their field placement students. Field manuals are another sub-theme that participants discussed when speaking about university and agency support.

**Field manuals.** Three participants reported using the requisite literature that they had received from the participating university to try and navigate their way through dealing with an underperforming field placement student. Some of the literature that these three participants

reported to use included the policies and procedures manual from the participating university that explains and defines their role as a field placement supervisor. In the interviews, the field manual was a highly contested and debated topic that most participants felt needed to be more accessible to field supervisors. A number of participants suggested that the field manual needed to be changed to a different format as they felt that it was “too long and burdensome” to be something of good use. Three participants remarked that they had never even read the field manual that had been given to them as they simply did not have enough time in their busy schedules to do so. The participating university publishes a field manual for social work field supervisors that is then given to anyone interested in becoming a field placement supervisor; however, most participants reported that they seldom consulted the manual because of the time constraints related to juggling both their work commitments and their supervisory obligations or the belief that they could simply resolve the issue on their own.

The five participants who took part in this study and who were from the participating university’s satellite campus and located in a rural region of Ontario commented that since they provided placement opportunities for a variety of students from a range of different universities throughout the school year, it can become a confusing task to try and figure out what field manual to consult with when they have so many of them in their office to contend with. In one particular interview, one participant opened her desk and pointed to all the different universities field manuals that she had been given over her career and then stated that she rarely “consults them”. In terms of the utilization and helpfulness of the field manual, one participant stated that:

“I am sure there are manuals and stuff that come out on the computer but I don’t really know that they say. Have I looked at them? The first ..... [University] student that I ever had was when I worked in mental health and that was over sixteen years ago. Sending out

paper, I mean look at this office, I have so much paper in here. You want to send me one more manual, like I am sorry you know but reading it is not on my priority list”.

Three participants spoke directly about the constant requests they receive from universities across the province to provide their social work students with field placements and that they do not always have the space in their organization or the time in their schedules to accompany such requests. These participants that they will often get requests to provide placements for social work students a year in advance and that they do not always have the ability to know what kind of resources will be available or what their schedules will look like for the upcoming year. One participant reported that she had actually been asked to provide field placements for over ten different social work students during one particular semester and that she did not have the space in her office to do so. The last sub-theme that participants touched upon is acknowledgement.

***Acknowledgement.*** Providing field placement opportunities can often be seen as an unrecognized and underappreciated task for some social work field supervisors. Field supervisors willingly dedicate countless hours to the supervision of their field placement students and are seldom thanked for their unique contributions to not only the hosting university, but the profession of social work as well. One participant spoke directly about how she had really appreciated when a student and/or the hosting university would send out a thank you letter at the end of a placement. This participant said she felt that:

“Students should write a thank you letter or some kind of acknowledgement at the end and it should be a standard expectation. And I think even the school should send something out that says thank you for your commitment... because in our workplace some of us are taking a lot of students and some people are taking no one... Like I am not



saying it's like a prize or anything and I am not asking for gifts but just some type of acknowledgment".

Sending a standard thank you letter or a small token of appreciation by either the participating university or the from the actual placement student themselves was an area of discussion for three research participants. They felt that a thank-you letter gives the impression to field supervisors that there is an appreciation and sense of importance surrounding the provision of field placement opportunities to social work students, especially when a field placement does not go according to plan. In these three interviews, quite a lot of debate was generated in terms of what exactly should be provided as recognition to field supervisors and their agencies for creating placement opportunities for social work students and their ongoing support to the social work program. In relation to this debate, one participant recalled how:

"We have already given the university quite a bit, you know it would be nice maybe if they, even it was a you know dinner and uh... I don't how many [organizations] there are in \_\_\_\_\_ but a nice dinner, a nice speaker, something, a learning opportunity, you know. I know \_\_\_\_\_ [College] had a great one, I felt I really learned a lot that day and felt it was very worthwhile".

In terms of building and maintaining positive working relationships, one participant commented that she didn't feel that the participating university "was actively trying to engage us in a relationship and I really think that it is the university's responsibility you know, if you want opportunities for your students to have good placements, then you have to develop relationships with the organizations that can provide them". Similarly another research participant raised the question regarding how is the participating university "going to work towards encouraging field instructors to stick with them as opposed to \_\_\_\_\_ or even \_\_\_\_\_ [universities]?" In the

northern and rural catchment areas that this participating university is located, there are an increasing number of other universities in Ontario who are also competing to find placement opportunities for their social work students.

**Failure to fail.** The final theme that developed out the analyzed data surrounds the experiences that field supervisors went through when recommending a failure to the participating university and then hearing that the field placement student had essentially passed. All participants had at one point in their careers experienced an unsuitable field placement student. Six participants reported that when they had brought up issues surrounding their placement student's unsuitable behaviour to both their placement students and the faculty consultant, the issues either resolved themselves, the learning contract was modified or the field placement student found a new placement with a different supervisor. The other four participants from this study reported that they had recommended a failing grade to their faculty consultants based on their placement's student's unsuitable behaviour. Participant #1 had recommended that their placement student fail their placement; however, she later remarked that they did not know what happened afterwards as the participating university did not get back to them regarding whether or not the student actually ended up failing. Participant #1 stated that "she did not know what happened" when speaking about the outcome of her field placement student when she had recommend a fail to the participating university.

Participants #3, #4 and #6 indicated in their interviews that due to the unsuitable behaviours that their social work students had displayed during their field placements, all three participants recommended a fail to the faculty consultant. The participants explained that there had been numerous attempts to address the issues of the offending behaviour to their students in question and the faculty consultant but unfortunately these situations were not rectified.

Participants #3, #4, and #6 reported that they had ended up hearing that their field placement student had actually passed their field placement through different sources. Participant #3 stated

“So we recommended a fail to the coordinator of the placement but I knew for a fact that they didn’t follow our recommendations...I was very upset. Not for the fact that they didn’t listen, but for the student. What kind of message were you giving the student? I think they were giving her the wrong message”.

As a result of the university passing her student even after a fail was recommended, participant #3 reported that she felt like she had “put a lot of energy and a lot of time into that student” that she really didn’t have and this heavily impacted her actual paid work as well as her feelings towards the participating university.

Participant #4 spoke about how his placement student’s issues were preventing him from being further along in his placement as he should have been so in consultation with the participating university, participant #4 recommended that his placement student fail. Participant #4 reported that “as far as I heard, it’s a smaller community, was that he had moved to another placement and had continued the rest of his time there which has its own issues”. Though participant #4 had recommended that his placement student fail the placement at his agency; the participating university’s response was to give the student another opportunity to complete the remainder of his placement hours at a different agency. Lastly, participant #6 reported that she had also recommended that her placement student receive a failing mark to the participating university. Participant #6 stated “I don’t really know what happened, however this is what I believe happened just by what I heard.... I heard that she did pass... I heard this through another student who came to me and told me that this girl was bad mouthing me and the agency”.

### **Chapter Four: Discussion**

This qualitative study attempted to explore the experiences of social work field placement supervisors when encountering an underperforming student. The results from this study demonstrate that all ten participants had encountered an underperforming field placement student at some point throughout their careers, yet their experiences had both similarities as well as differences. Gatekeeping was reported to be an important function by all respondents in ensuring that only competent field placement students are able to graduate and enter the field of social work. To reiterate gatekeeping is defined as the act of monitoring or supervising others (Brammer, 2008). Gatekeeping measures such as interviewing and screening students prior to offering a placement opportunity, requesting references and/or a resume and recommending a failing grade to the participating university are some of the mechanisms that field placement supervisors can put in place at their own organizations and/or agencies.

When social work field supervisors attempted to implement gatekeeping measures into the supervision of their placement students, they have come up against some major challenges from the participating university. Participants who recommended a failing grade to the participating university felt like their suggestions were simply not valued. Field placement supervisors in this study experienced conflict between their role of being a social worker and the role of gatekeeping underperforming students. Though many participants shared similar experiences in regards to how they encountered an underperforming field placement student, the way each field supervisor dealt with the situation was uniquely their own.

The data collected from the participants indicates that underperforming field placement students are a real and valid concern for social work field supervisors. The major finding from this study points to how gatekeeping measures are most effective when field supervisors feel

supported, valued and appreciated by both the organization that they work for as well the participating university. Several salient themes emerged from this study such as, self-awareness of the field supervisor, determining student suitability, student behaviours, coping styles, university and organizational support and failure to fail. These themes will be discussed in further detail in the section below.

### **Literature Related to Findings**

When field supervisors experience an underperforming field placement student, it can often be a very stressful time for them in both their personal lives and professional careers. Understanding the impact that experiencing underperforming field placement students can have on field placement supervisors can help secure field supervisor retention rates (Tam, 2003). This speaks to the theme of self-awareness and its importance for field supervisors. Self-awareness of the field supervisor emerged as one the major themes from this study. Those participants who reported a strong sense of self-awareness surrounding their role as a field supervisor fared better when experiencing student behaviors connected to field placement underperformance (Didham et al., 2011). The literature described self-awareness as being conscious of the use of self in the work environment, an insight into one's own beliefs and practices and an awareness of one's emotional reactivity on self and others (Kwaitek, McKenize & Loads, 2005). Feedback from these interviews indicated that those supervisors who spoke to varying degrees about their own self-awareness were also able to speak about the impact that experiencing an underperforming field placement student had on both their personal and professional lives.

Bogo et al. (2007) described the challenge to field supervisors' professional image and how field supervisors may feel that it is they who have not fulfilled their supervisory obligations when having to contemplate failing a field placement student. Feeling overwhelmed with work

responsibilities coupled with the additional supervision of an underperforming field placement student were two related stressors most frequently reported by participants from this study.

Koerin and Miller (1995) identified professional role conflicts occurring when field supervisors' values in self-determination, acceptance and capacity for change are not in line with the potential outcomes of executing the gatekeeping function. This contributes greatly to the lack of enforceability of the gatekeeping mechanism for social work supervisors and creates a personal dilemma for the field work supervisor.

All ten participants spoke to varying degrees about how self-aware they were when encountering an underperforming field placement student. Gizynski (1978) argued that lack of self-awareness on the field supervisor's part may negatively impact the student's learning process. Lack of self-awareness on the student's part can also add an extra burden to the supervisory relationship and these circumstances may cause a dual role conflict in that the supervisor may have to balance between being both a teacher and a therapist. The supervisor's professional and personal concern for their student as well as their feelings of being a member of the social work profession can make the supervisor "...vulnerable to the same kind of counter transference distortions in the supervisory relationship as the student has in the client-worker relationship" (Gizynski, 1978, p. 204). This can be related back to the findings as one participant acknowledged her role as a supervisor and expressed how she wanted to stay away from becoming her placement's student's counselor.

Participants from this study who were experienced and had a strong sense of self-awareness of the requirements of their role as a field supervisor indicated they were less stressed when it came to experiencing an underperforming field placement student. This appeared to help mitigate some of the stressors associated with field placement underperformance. Most of the

participants from this study spoke about how the impact of experiencing an underperforming student affected them negatively but that they were still able to work through the situation with the belief that the profession of social work needed gatekeepers to ensure that only competent students were able to graduate and enter the profession.

In addition, Gizynski (1978) stated that a lack of self-awareness on the part of the field supervisor may lead to a serious impact on the learning process for the field placement student. When a field supervisor can freely share with their placement student information related to their own attempts at expanding their clinical self-awareness then they can truly assist their student in developing this valuable skill set (Gizynski, 1978). When field supervisors possess a sense of self-awareness in their professional role as a student mentor and receive sufficient organizational and university support, this can have a direct impact on how they view the conflicting role of being both a social worker and an evaluator.

Confliction was found to be a connecting subtheme associated with the self-awareness of the field supervisor theme. Half of the participants reported that they struggled with the conflicting roles of being both an evaluator while also responding to the student's struggle with personal issues, completion of tasks and/or learning contract objectives. Several respondents indicated that they had modified learning contracts when told that their students' were experiencing some type of personal issue. Bogo et al. (2007) reported that "a paradox is then created in which the skills and behaviors required to be a good evaluator may be at odds with the deeply held values of the social worker" (p. 114). Confliction or dual roles dilemmas are beginning to surface in social work literature (Currer & Atherton, 2008; Rasmussen, 2003; Tam, 2003). Field supervisors are indeed in a conflicted role when having to decide to fail their field placement student. For those participants who practiced from a strengths-based perspective, the

analyzed data indicated that they had a very difficult time rationalizing failing a student (Saleebey, 2006). If field supervisors believe that “people have the potential to change and improve”, they may be hesitant to fail students even when the student is performing at an unsatisfactory level (Tam, 2003, p. 56). The data in this study indicated that much of this confliction stemmed from the type of student behaviours that lead to underperformance.

One such behavior is when students become triggered by something that they have witnessed in the field placement setting. Participants from this study stated that they sometimes had difficulty distinguishing between their role as supervisor and their role as a therapist and were hesitant when it came time to broach the subject of why their field placement student was underperforming. Tam (2003) pointed out that when field placement supervisors are forced to confront underperformance of a student related to personal issues, many field supervisors are reluctant to explore the topic even when the student is failing to meet the requirements of their placement.

The triple roles for social work field supervisors of being nurturers, developers of emerging talent in field placement students as well as gatekeepers can often conflict with each other (Curren & Atherton, 2008). Field supervisors are committed to the social work principles of acceptance, validating worth and the right to self-determination while on the other hand have the responsibility “...to protect future clients from those who may see themselves as competent social workers, but who may have ethical or cultural attitudes, and/or psychological or interpersonal difficulties which result in harm to clients” (Regehr et al., 2001, p. 128). Tam (2003) argued that this conflict creates a circumstance where gatekeeping is not addressed consistently and the pressure for untrained or inexperienced field placement supervisors’ results in underperforming graduates. The data from this study appears to support this argument.



Screening out field placement students during the interview phase versus recommending that a field placement student fail at the end of their practicum are two different gatekeeping functions that participants from this study reported to have undertaken while supervising unsuitable field placement students. Screening out field placement students during the initial interview phase serves to gatekeep for the employer, while recommending a failing grade serves to gatekeep for the university. Field supervisors are forced to wear two different hats when maintaining the gatekeeping function and this can lead to further role conflict when it comes to determining student suitability during the pre-screening phase and when recommending whether a student should pass or fail their field placement.

Professional relationships and supervisor/student boundaries are important topics that stem from dual role relationships and can be linked to the self-awareness of the field supervisor. Rasmussen (2003) reported that when developing and managing relations amongst field supervisors and placement students, it is important to establish rapport in the first interview and in daily interactions. Setting boundaries and guidelines as well as effective communication are essential when it comes to the relationship between the field supervisor and placement student (Rasmussen, 2003). Rasmussen (2003) indicated that assertiveness training can be gained through maintaining professional boundaries. Tam (2003) also recommended that field instruction training can help supervisors to recognize their role in the gatekeeping process as well as learn about new theories and skills in field instruction.

The second theme that emerged from this study centered on how field supervisors determined student suitability when providing students with field placement opportunities. Professional suitability was described as being more than just the student's knowledge and skill base but included personal characteristics, values, and life experiences as well (Miller & Koerin,

2001). The results from this study indicate that field supervisors utilize numerous screening methods when determining the suitability of potential social work field placement students. Some of these screening methods included having field placement students come in for face-to-face interviews as well as having them send in their resume. Gibbs' (1994) study on the different screening mechanisms used in BSW programs painted a very similar story. Gibbs' (1994) interviewed 207 respondents who listed a variety of gatekeeping approaches that were not only tied to admissions screening but to other areas of social work education as well. The findings from Gibbs' (1994) study illustrated how screening mechanisms were in fact utilized when determining student suitability and some of these included asking for references or recommendations, malpractice insurance and membership to a professional social work association. Gibbs' (1994) reported that almost all participants indicated that field instructors could reject a student who wanted to do a placement at their agency based on a variety of reasons which included questionable student suitability for the agency's line of work, more students applying to an agency than the agency could take, and the feeling that the agency required a more mature student. Questionable mental health was a less frequent reason for dismissal by field instructors according to Gibbs' (1994) study. During the initial interview, participants reported that they would determine a student's suitability for a placement position at their agency by asking a variety of different questions to assess whether or not the student would be a good fit. Participants indicated that the type of questions that they would ask during the initial interview would be based around whether or not the type of work that the student would be conducting at their placement would be something that they were interested in. Three respondents disclosed that due to the nature of the type of services that their agencies offered, they would ask specific questions to prospective students regarding whether or not they had been

impacted by the same client issues that their agencies worked with. Many of the participants from this study utilized some of these reasons when it came to rejecting potential field placement students. Professional suitability also appeared to be linked to student behaviours. Screening out prospective students because their learning goals may not be compatible with the agency's mandate is much different than having to fail an underperforming field placement student. Screening out students during the interview phase serves to gatekeep for the employer, while providing a failing recommendation at the end of a field placement serves to gatekeep for the university. This can be tied directly to the role conflict that was discussed earlier in that field supervisors must occupy two different positions when it comes to enforcing their gatekeeping responsibility as they are required to gatekeep for their own organization as well as for the participating university.

The different type of student behaviours that contributed to student underperformance was the third theme that came out of the analyzed data and appears to be in line with the current literature that is available on this very same topic. Bogo et al. (2007) reported that "students' presenting with attitudes and behaviors inconsistent with social work has frequently been raised as a concern for educators" (p. 101). Participants from this study indicated that the type of student behaviors that led to underperformance centered around showing up late, calling in sick on numerous occasions, lack of actual social work training, interpersonal issues with placement supervisor and/or other organizational staff, not being present during counseling sessions and personal issues that would get in the way of their placement work. Moore and Urwin (1990) identified that a lack of maturity and intellectual capacity were the most easily definable behaviors found in underperforming field placements. Koerin and Miller (1995) reported that ethics, mental health or substance abuse, field performance and illegal activities were the most

common reasons why students were terminated from their field placements. Participants from this study reported that they felt their students' unsatisfactory performance was directly related to something going on in their personal lives. This triggered inappropriate behaviours included showing up late for placement, calling in sick on a continuous basis, checking out during counseling sessions and becoming argumentative or challenging the field supervisor and/or other organizational staff.

Results from this study indicate that role conflict, underperformance and student behaviours are connected to a lack of self-awareness of both the field supervisor and placement student. Gizynski (1978) stated that a lack of self-awareness of the field supervisor can cause major challenges to the field supervisor and placement student's relationship. When field supervisors are aware of the impact that occupying both the role of a supervisor and the role of a social worker can have on their professional careers, they will be better equipped to navigate the boundaries when they experience problematic student behaviours related to personal issues (Bogo et al., 2007). Participants indicated that when their placement students were experiencing performance issues related to personal problems, they did not know whether their role as a supervisor included providing therapy. Participants reported that student underperformance was often linked to some type of personal issue going on in their students' lives, yet participants were unsure of whether it was their role as field placement supervisors to address personal issues that could be impacting student performance. Providing clear guidelines surrounding the role and expectations of a field supervisor by the participating university could help circumvent some of the confusion surrounding this dual role dilemma.

The coping styles of field placement supervisors were the fourth theme to emerge from this study. Coping styles included using a strengths-based approach, relying on the belief that

participants were protecting the quality and integrity of the social work profession, and utilizing the support from both the university and their own agency. Most participants from this study spoke directly about how they were able to cope when experiencing a student who was underperforming due to some type of personal issue going on in their lives. The term “wounded healer” is used to describe students who have made the decision to enter the profession of social work based on a personal history of trauma (Regehr et al., 2001). Social work students who have had difficult life experiences and have not been able to work through their personal histories may run a high risk of becoming triggered by something that occurs in the field placement setting. Regehr et al. (2001) called for additional training opportunities for “wounded healers” in order to prevent further traumatization.

Participants from this study were very hesitant when it came to addressing their students’ underperformance due to the perceived conflicting roles of being both a field placement supervisor and the apparent need to be a therapist in order to respond to the student’s inappropriate behaviors. Didham et al., (2011) suggest that “there would be benefit for students, field instructors and faculty to formally assist students in recognizing significant previous trauma and critical incidents that they have not resolved” (p. 533). The data from this study suggests that in these particular circumstances, students would be more emotionally prepared for the type of work that would be taking place in the placement setting if further training and support was available for those students identified as “wounded healers” (Regehr et al., 2001). Brammer (2008) writes that the experiences field placement supervisors encounter will influence both their competence and confidence and their development as a professional educator. Most participants spoke directly to the impact that experiencing an underperforming student had on their professional career, but only a few indicated how this directly impacted their emotional or

mental wellbeing. Participants said when they feel supported and valued for their contributions while also dealing with the behaviors of an underperforming student, their commitment to being a field supervisor and thus a gatekeeper of the social work field appeared to be strengthened.

The fifth theme that emerged from this study centered on organizational and agency support. The data indicated that timely and effective organizational and university support can help to diminish the personal impact that field supervisors experience when encountering an underperforming field placement student. Rosenfeld (1989) reported that one of the main reasons why the turnover rate was so high for social work field placement supervisors was due to a perceived lack of university support. Participants from this study spoke about how the assistance that they received from the participating university was not as available or as effective as they would have liked when it came to dealing with an underperforming field placement student. The type of support and assistance that was available from both the participating university and the organization that the field supervisor worked for was directly related to how field supervisors viewed their experience with an underperforming student. One of the major concerns that participants from this study raised was not having their failing recommendations followed up with by the participating university. Most of the participants saw their field placement students behaviors improve when the issues were discussed, brought out into the open during weekly meetings or modifications were made to learning contracts. In one case, the respondent was told that the reason why they couldn't uphold the failing mark was due to bureaucratic reasons associated with the participating university.

When it comes to organizational and university support, Tam (2003) stated that due to a lack of resources and an increased workload, recruiting and retaining field placement supervisors has become a major issue in social work as well as in numerous other helping professions.

Prescribed mandatory training can help social work faculty to better understand the role of field supervisors and the time commitments associated with training students to become competent social workers. Mandatory training can also help circumvent any problems that may arise when field placement supervisors are faced with the dilemma of having to recommend a fail to an underperforming student.

Tam (2003) reported that friction exists between field supervisors and staff liaisons (field placement coordinators and/or faculty consultants) and this has led to some major difficulties within the gatekeeping process. When dealing with underperforming field placement students, four respondents from this study pointed to a lack of university and organizational support. Tam (2003) recommended that institutional support "...can be strengthened by: enhancing communication between the university and field instructors; providing adequate informational, technical, and collateral support to field instructors; supporting field instructors who encountered 'difficult' students; and liaising closely with field instructors who reported to have students who may warrant failing the practicum" (p. 60). Participants from this study suggested similar recommendations but also requested the participating university provide additional training opportunities.

Redmond and Bright (2007) argued that social work educators "...have a duty to ensure that only students with the skills and values necessary to serve clients are admitted to professional practice" (p. 167). Some participants felt that when a field placement student was underperforming, that it was their duty to work together with the student to ensure that they pass their placement. This occurred by meeting with the student and going over their field placement objectives and sometimes scaling back any projects and tasks that their students were unable to finish. Modifying learning contracts in order for field placement students to pass has implications

as students who graduate and enter the social work profession will rarely have the opportunity to be able to scale back on their work load and this tactic may not facilitate student learning. This topic is related to a cluster of issues such as how the university develops professional competency of their social work students, providing better training opportunities for field supervisors in learning how to prepare realistic learning contracts, providing acknowledgement of the contributions that field supervisors undertake when providing placement opportunities to students and making available more resources for field placement coordinators and participating social service agencies. Koerin and Miller (1995) argued that since social work programs do not exist in a vacuum alone, as schools of social work must develop clear guidelines surrounding the role of the university within field placements and these guidelines must then be communicated to all parties involved in field placement process.

Tam (2003) defined practical issues as the lack of standardized criteria and inadequate screening at admissions, while organizational problems include the lack of university support and the lack of competent field instructors and placement opportunities and finally, attitudinal problems include the dual role dilemma and the fear of litigation. There is a dearth of available social work literature when it comes to providing solutions for social work supervisors who experience some type of emotional stress related to their gatekeeping experience. Additional support for both students and field placement supervisors could contribute to more successful outcomes for both parties.

The final theme that emerged from this study surrounds the participating university's hesitancy in following through with failing a field placement student. Failing to fail field placement students who have demonstrated unsuitable behaviours in the field placement setting was a reoccurring theme that four participants had touched upon in their individual interviews.



The literature suggests that the reason behind why there is such a hesitancy in failing to fail social work placement students is two pronged; the first being that schools of social work fail to provide clear policies and guidelines when it comes to defining what exactly constitutes professional suitability and unacceptable student field placement behaviour (Koerin & Miller, 1995; Tam, 2003). The second reason behind why schools of social work do not always follow through on a field supervisor's failing recommendation is the potential for legal repercussions associated with failing field placement students (Barlow et al., 1991; Cole & Lewis, 1993; Redmond & Bright, 2007; Tam, 2003).

### **Implications for the Field of Social Work**

Gatekeeping within the field of social work is not an entirely new concept as historically it can be traced back to over a hundred years ago when the profession first began to develop (Moore and Urwin, 1991). The *Canadian Association of Social Workers* has a *Code of Ethics* that all social workers must uphold in their professional practice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005). The field placement supervisor is required to make sure that their social work students are subscribing to these same principles and guidelines. University social work programs are continuously having to "...develop effective gatekeeping procedures to promote optimal functioning of students while maintaining quality control in professional education" (Urwin, Van Soest, & Kretzschmar, 2006, p. 163).

Gatekeeping is often seen as a controversial topic in many different disciplines. The act of gatekeeping in the field of social work presents many challenges such as legal repercussions (Redmond & Bright, 2007), conflicting roles of the field supervisor (Regehr et al., 2001), and the time commitment and extra workload it can add to the already burdened field supervisor (Tam, 2003). Redmond and Bright (2007) raised the issue of whether or not the values associated with

the social work profession are congruent with the concept of gatekeeping as social workers are obligated to value each “individual’s capacity for change and growth” (p. 169). This study indicates that social work supervisors who practice from a strengths-based perspective can still successfully navigate their way through the experience of an underperforming student as long as they are aware of how important the gatekeeping function is to the field of social work (Saleeby, 2006). When social workers decide to become field supervisors, they may be taking on the added responsibility of becoming a gatekeeper to the entire profession. However, field supervisors must first come to some type of understanding as to what exactly constitutes “gatekeeping”. Koerin and Miller (1995) have identified that there is a lack of clear policies and procedures surrounding underperforming student behaviours that could lead to termination from university social work programs. Participants from this study listed a number of nonacademic behaviors that have led to field placement underperformance such as breaching confidentiality, showing up late, frequent absences, not being present while working with clients, fighting with clients and/or agency staff and failing to listen to field supervisor feedback. By providing additional training opportunities for field supervisors, university social work faculty can help field supervisors be able to implement gatekeeping mechanisms into the field placement setting.

The legal ramifications associated with the process of gatekeeping within the university setting have implications for how schools of social work choose to address underperforming students in field placements. There is also a belief that schools are more dependent on the financial gains associated with high student enrollment and have become less concerned with maintaining high gatekeeping standards (Moore and Urwin, 1991). Moore and Urwin (1990) indicated that external pressures such as legal concerns about student rights and the economic impact of student enrollment may lead to faculty and administrative reluctance when exercising

the gatekeeping function. Fear of possible legal repercussions have caused trepidation on the part of many university administrations as to why they are so hesitant to fail field placement students across professional schools (Cole & Lewis, 1993; Sowbel, 2011; Redmond & Bright, 2007). Bright and Redmond (2007) pointed out that these cases illustrated how social work educators need continuous training opportunities to learn more about their legal responsibilities to the students that they mentor. If universities continue to allow their fear of possible legal repercussions to control their ability to govern student performance then the quality of competent graduates will dramatically decrease (Cole & Lewis, 1993). The implications of failing to enact professional standards into university based social work programs can be perceived as a direct threat to the livelihood of the social work profession as a whole (Cole & Lewis, 1993; Regehr et al., 2001).

The field of social work needs competent graduates with the requisite skills and experience to be able to work with some of the most vulnerable members of the population. In order to ensure that the gatekeeping function is being implemented into the field of social work, social worker supervisors need to know about their ethical obligations surrounding how to effectively deal with unsatisfactory student behaviors in the field placement setting.

The results from this qualitative study have implications for the field of social work as it highlights the need for more studies to be conducted on how schools of social work ensure, maintain or challenge the gatekeeping function of the field placement settings they collaborate with. Gatekeeping is considered to be an important function of the field placement supervisor in expanding the skill set of prospective social work interns (Miller & Koerin, 2001). This study indicates just how important the concept of gatekeeping is to the ten participants and how seriously they take their responsibility in making sure that only competent students are able to

graduate and enter the profession. This study suggests that more training, assistance and support need to occur at the university level for not only field supervisors, but for social work students as well. Social work supervisors do have an ethical obligation to gatekeep their profession by ensuring that only competent field placement students receive a passing grade; however, admission and retention policies and academic curriculum in schools of social work and universities may not reflect the same obligations.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The data that came from all ten of the transcribed interviews indicates that experiencing underperforming students in rural and northern social work field placement settings actually occurs at a much more alarming rate than previously understood. One of the study's limitations was that only field supervisors were interviewed for this study. In order to get a better idea of the impact that experiencing an underperforming student can have on all those involved in this specific type of learning opportunity, then social work field placement students, faculty consultants and field placement coordinators should have been interviewed as well.

### **Future Research**

The emotional and psychological impact that experiencing an underperforming field placement student can have on field supervisors is an important area that needs to be studied in greater detail. Only two participants from this study spoke directly to the emotional impact that experiencing an underperforming field placement student had on them using adjectives such as "stressful" and "difficult". There was an overall hesitancy in speaking directly about the emotional impact that such an experience had on participants' overall emotional wellbeing. Universities could address this through recognizing three main problem areas: "practical, organizational and attitudinal issues" (Tam, 2003, p. 59).

**Conclusion**

Gatekeeping is a necessary function for a variety of different professional programs as it allows for only competent students to graduate and thus enter their respective fields. Gatekeeping plays an important role in the field of social work as it ensures that only capable social work students are able to graduate and become registered social workers. Social work field supervisors have an ethical responsibility to screen out students who are underperforming. Sometimes social work students pass their initial field placement interview, but may show warning signs of underperformance later on in their placement. If field placement students have not developed the relevant knowledge and experience to be able to work through whatever issues that are going on in their own life either past or present, it may impact their ability to become effective and empathetic social workers. The data appears to support the contention that the participating university plays a very important role in ensuring field placement supervisors feel satisfied in their supervisory positions. If the social work department at the participating university could provide more timely and effective communication during these stressful times for field supervisors, then not only will field placement supervisors' satisfaction rates greatly increase, but their commitment to providing field placement opportunities to social work students will continue. Formal acknowledgement of the ongoing support and commitment that field supervisors tirelessly dedicate to their field placement students emerged as an important theme from this study. Providing acknowledgement to field supervisors not only establishes better rapport and builds upon already existing relationships, it also indicates that all the effort and hard work that it takes to provide these types of opportunities to field placement students have not gone unnoticed.

In conclusion, this research study raises some very pertinent issues surrounding the ethical obligations that academic programs have in ensuring competent social work students enter the social work profession. The themes that emerged from this study suggest a need for change regarding how the School of Social Work at the participating university currently engages and respond to their field placement supervisors' recommendations for failing underperforming students. The relationship between these key players and the university is paramount for future success. Field supervisors provide social work placement students with the opportunity for direct social work experience and can help these students develop the requisite skills to be able to become effective social workers. Field supervisors have also been given the role of gatekeepers of the social work profession and are often the first ones to witness a placement student's issues and behaviors related to underperformance. By leaving such valuable expertise out of the equation when deciding to pass or fail a placement student, the social work department of the participating university risks alienating social service agencies and in particular losing the valuable experience and collaborative knowledge of this particular group of people.

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## **Appendices**

**Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer**

**Appendix B: Recruitment Email**

**Appendix C: Letter of Introduction**

**Appendix D: Consent Form**

**Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaires**

**Appendix F: Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

**Appendix G: Approved Ethics Form**



Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

## Gatekeeping and Social Work



Department of Social Work  
Laurentian University

Field supervisors are needed to take part in a study examining the impact of underperforming students in field placements.

*Underperforming* refers to students who may have exhibited one or more of the listed behaviors during their field placements; failed to adhere to social work values and principles, exhibited unresolved mental health and/or substance abuse issues, displayed poor performance in the field placement, and showed a lack of respect for personal and cultural differences.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to take part in a face-to-face interview, which may take approximately sixty to ninety minutes.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer, please contact:

Haidie Paige Tupling  
MSW student, Laurentian University  
at [hp\\_tupling@laurentian.ca](mailto:hp_tupling@laurentian.ca)

**Appendix B: Recruitment Email**

My name is Haidie Paige Tupling, and I am a Graduate Student of Social Work at Laurentian University. I am conducting a research project that explores the experiences of field supervisors of underperforming students in field placements. I have obtained your name and address from Sandra Mooney/Susan Lacelle, the School of Social Work Field Supervisor at Laurentian University as a potential participant in this study. Your role would be to discuss your personal experiences as a Laurentian University School of Social Work Field Supervisor. It is my hope that you will consider contributing to this important piece of research. My goal for this study is to provide some valuable insights for faculty and field placement coordinators that may contribute to the development of certain policies and guidelines for field supervisors in the BSW/MSW programs at Laurentian University.

I have attached a Letter of Introduction and a poster that provides a more detailed explanation of the method and purpose of my study. If you are interested, a confidential interview will be arranged at a time and place that is most convenient for you.

Thanks so much,

Haidie Paige Tupling

### Appendix C: Letter of Introduction

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Haidie Paige Tupling, and I am a Graduate Student of Social Work at Laurentian University. I am conducting a research project that explores the experiences of field supervisors of underperforming students in field placements. I have obtained your name and address from Susan Lacelle, the School of Social Work Field Supervisor as a potential participant in this study. Your role would be to discuss your personal experiences as a Laurentian University School of Social Work Field Supervisor. It is my hope that you will consider contributing to this important piece of research. My goal for this study is to provide some valuable insights for faculty and field placement coordinators and contribute to the development of policies and guidelines for field supervisors in the BSW/MSW programs at Laurentian University.

Enclosed please find an informed consent form which provides more detailed information about the intent of this study and the different steps that will be expected of participants. Also please find enclosed a short questionnaire. The interview will be confidential and will be arranged at a time and place that is convenient for you. If you agree to participate, you will take part in a 1 to 1.5 hour interview, either in person or over the telephone. The interview will be audio-recorded and you will be able to receive a summary of the research findings if you choose. You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty, and the fact of your withdrawal will not be conveyed to anyone else. During the interview, you may find it stressful to recall some aspects of your experiences, and you can refuse to answer any questions and/or ask to take a break. All information that you supply during the interview will be held in confidence and your name will not be appear in any report or publication surrounding this study.

The research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board at Laurentian University. If you would like to participate in this research study or have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [hp\\_tupling@laurentian.ca](mailto:hp_tupling@laurentian.ca). You may also contact my research supervisors, Dr. Janet Yorke, (705) 325-2740, ext. 3067, [jyorke@laurentian.ca](mailto:jyorke@laurentian.ca) or Dr. Leigh MacEwan, 1-800-461-4030, ext. 5059, [lmacewan@laurentian.ca](mailto:lmacewan@laurentian.ca). If you have any questions about the ethics of this research study, you may also contact Dr. Jean Dragon in the Research Office at Laurentian University at 1-800-461-4030, ext. 3123 or at [jdragon@laurentian.ca](mailto:jdragon@laurentian.ca).

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Haidie Paige Tupling, MSW Student  
Laurentian University  
705-796-7087  
[hp\\_tupling@laurentian.ca](mailto:hp_tupling@laurentian.ca)

## **Appendix D: Consent Form**

### **Study Title: Gatekeeping and Social Work**

**Researcher:** Haidie Paige Tupling, Laurentian University

#### Background Information

My name is Haidie Paige Tupling, and I am a Graduate Student of Social Work at Laurentian University. As part of my thesis, I am exploring the experiences of field supervisors of underperforming students in field placements. The focus of this study is important as it may provide some valuable insight into how field supervisors experience underperforming students and may also contribute to the development of policies and guidelines for field supervisors in the BSW/MSW programs at Laurentian University.

#### Participation

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Your role will be to discuss your personal experiences of being a Laurentian University School of Social Work Field Supervisor. If you agree to participate, you will take part in one interview, in person or by telephone. The interview will be audio-recorded and will take between 1 to 1.5 hours.

You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty, and the fact of your withdrawal will not be conveyed to anyone else. Your withdrawal from this study will not affect your relationship with the Social Work program at Laurentian University. There is minimal emotional risk associated with this study; however you may find it stressful to recall some aspects of your experiences. If you do find the interview stressful, you can refuse to answer any questions and/or ask to take a break. I can also arrange for community resources if required.

#### Confidentiality

All information that you supply during this interview will be held in confidence and your name will not appear in any report or publication surrounding this study. Your employer does not have the right to access any information from this study. Your identity will not be revealed at any time, and no opinions will be attributed to you. I will keep all audiotapes, any handwritten notes, and any other data from the interviews in a locked cabinet in the Laurentian University office of my supervisor, Dr. Janet Yorke, for a period of five years after the study is completed. At the end of these five years, all written data and audiotapes will then be destroyed.

When this study is completed, I will prepare a summary of the research findings and send it to you, if you wish. As the results of this study may be helpful to other social workers, I would like to present the research findings at academic, community, or social work conferences, and I may also want to publish the findings in an academic journal.

#### Contact

If you have any questions about the nature of this research or your own role in this study, I can be contacted at [hp\\_tupling@laurentian.ca](mailto:hp_tupling@laurentian.ca). You may also contact my research supervisors, Dr. Janet Yorke, (705) 325-2740, ext. 3067, [jyorke@laurentian.ca](mailto:jyorke@laurentian.ca) or Dr. Leigh MacEwan, 1-800-461-4030, ext. 5059, [lmacewan@laurentian.ca](mailto:lmacewan@laurentian.ca). If you have any questions about the ethics of this research study, you may also contact Dr. Jean Dragon in the Research Office at Laurentian University at 1-800-461-4030, ext. 3123 or at [jdragon@laurentian.ca](mailto:jdragon@laurentian.ca)

### Consent

**I agree to take part in this study; *Gatekeeping and Social Work; Exploring the Impact of Failing Students in Field Placements*.**

**I have read and understand the above information. I consent to my information in my questionnaire being included in the study.**

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**I consent to take part in a semi-structured interview. I have received a copy of this form for my records.**

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**I would like a copy of the research findings.**

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

-----  
**Please provide your email address if you would like to receive a copy of the research findings**

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**Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaires**  
(Taken from the Luhanga et al. 2014 study)

At the start of this interview, the researcher will ask you several brief demographic questions. Your answers to these questions will help provide the researcher with detailed information surrounding the specific population that is being sampled. Upon answering the demographic questions, the researcher will then begin the semi-structured interview. The interview will last approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. It is important to remember that you have the right to withdraw at any time, without penalty, and the fact of your withdrawal will not be conveyed to anyone else. If you find it stressful to recall some aspects of your experiences at any time during this interview, you can refuse to answer any questions or ask to take a break.

1. What is your highest level of education and the year you graduated?

- a. Diploma
- b. Baccalaureate
- c. Masters
- d. Other

2. Number of years in current position?

3. Total number of years as a field supervisor?

4. Total number of students supervised?

5. Age of Participant?

- a. 19-24 years
- b. 25-34 years
- c. 35-44 years
- d. 45-54 years
- e. 55-64 years
- f. Over 65 years

6. Relationship Status:

- a. Single
- b. Married/Common Law
- c. Separated
- d. Divorced
- e. Widowed

7. Geographic Location of Agency?

- a. Sudbury Region
- b. Simcoe County Region

**Appendix F: Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

(Taken from the Luhanga et al. 2014 study)

1. In your experience as field supervisor (past or present), have you ever experienced an underperforming student during a field placement or practicum?
2. If so, could you please describe the situation and outcome?
3. While experiencing an underperforming student in field placement, did you receive any assistance? If so, what kind of assistance did you receive and from whom?
4. Do you think that there are factors in place that prevent field supervisors from failing students?
5. Do you feel that field placement students pass their placements even when their performance may not have warranted it?
6. What kind of factors do you think need to be put in place in order to prevent underperforming students from passing their field placements?

## Appendix G: Approved Ethics Form



### APPROVAL FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS Research Ethics Board – Laurentian University

This letter confirms that the research project identified below has successfully passed the ethics review by the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board (REB). Your ethics approval date, other milestone dates, and any special conditions for your project are indicated below.

TYPE OF APPROVAL	New	X	Modifications to project	Time extension
Name of Principal Investigator and school/department	Haidie Paige Tupling, Janet Vorke and Leigh MacEwan; & supervisors) – School of Social Work (Laurentian University) &			
Title of Project	<i>Gatekeeping and Social Work: Exploring the impact of failing students in field placements</i>			
REB file number	2012-02-08			
Date of original approval of project	May 10 <sup>th</sup> 2012			
Date of approval of project modifications or extension (if applicable)				
Final/Interim report due on	December 30 <sup>th</sup> 2012			
Conditions placed on project	Final or interim report on December 30 <sup>th</sup> 2012			

During the course of your research, no deviations or changes to the protocol, recruitment or consent forms may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. If you wish to modify your research project, please complete the appropriate [REB form](#).

All projects must submit a report to REB at least once per year. If involvement with human participants continues for longer than one year (e.g. you have not completed the objectives of the study and have not yet terminated contact with the participants, except for feedback of final results to participants), you must request an extension using the appropriate [REB FORM](#).

In all cases, please ensure that your research complies with the [Tri-Council Policy Statement \(TCPS\)](#). Also please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence with the REB office.

Congratulations, and best of luck in conducting your research.

&  
Jean Dragon Ph.D. (Ethics officer LU) for Susan James Ph.D.  
Acting Chair of the *Laurentian University Research Ethics Board*  
Laurentian University



**Figure 1: Display Map Overview**